

Civil Servants' Resistance toward E-Government Development

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INTRODUCTION

As the new UNPAN E-Government Readiness Report (2004) stated, during the last years, governments worldwide have made rapid progress in embracing information and communication technologies for electronic government. All over, several projects have been carried out in order to offer more and better information to citizens and to improve public service delivery. Nevertheless, not all of them have been successful. Several factors have restrained governments at all levels from implementing thriving e-government initiatives.

Research has shown that workers' resistance to change is one of the major obstacles that organizations face when trying to implement innovation change processes. The public sector is not an exception. Due to its intrinsic characteristics, the introduction of information technology and, particularly, of electronic government programs requires paying special attention to the potential crisis situation to which these initiatives could lead. The intention of this article is to make clear how public servants experience and react to those changes that result from the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within the public administration; that is, to analyze the people dimension of change.

BACKGROUND

More and more, governments and public administrations are getting used to the new tools brought about by the new information era. The Internet and a growing array of information and communication technologies have modified widely the possibilities for organizing the government and the state. In particular, digital government projects have become a powerful way to contribute to public administration reform and modernization processes that have been taking place in many countries during the last two decades.

Indeed, electronic government has the potential to cut transaction costs all the way to zero in some cases (Fountain, 2001) and, therefore, to obtain efficiency gains, to become more transparent, to reduce corruption, and to

enhance public service delivery. In short, it may lead to a more citizen-oriented government that offers an improved range of services and that, in return, increases the level of satisfaction among the population as well as the acceptance of the public sector (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2002).

It has been argued that, despite all its latent benefits, electronic government initiatives failure (total or partial) is far more prevalent than success. From analysis of both theoretical and real-world examples, Heeks and Bhatnagar (1999) concluded that the root causes of this situation are seen to lie in what they called conception-reality gaps; that is, those gaps that exist between the way in which digital government projects are conceived and the realities into which they are introduced.

In a sense, electronic government initiatives are not different from any other government actions, which means that they also are subject to unintended consequences that fundamentally are due to the adoption of imitation strategies on the one hand and to the introduction of change processes into a particular type of institution—the bureaucratic one—on the other hand. These two variables represent two conception-reality gaps. Thus, when the conceptual model does not take into consideration both the environment and the organization implementation context, electronic government programs tend to fail.

As Heeks and Bhatnagar (1999) put it, all information technology projects operate within a change context that has two main components. The first refers to the wider environment outside of the organization. It is characterized by the presence of other institutions, a specific level of development of new technologies, a particular state of the economy and the markets, several political pressures, or a variety of cultures and other social systems. That is why electronic government projects developed within the framework of a particular geographic context have to cope with the challenges of that specific country, region, or city. Imitation strategies that generally have been indifferent to economic, social, and political systems usually have been unsuccessful. For example, "a patient information system was developed in the US to support improved health resource management. When similar reforms based around IS were introduced in the UK, they ran into

difficulties. British nurses found it hard to use the new information system because of the U.S.-inspired assumptions it made about the planning and costing of patient care” (Heeks & Bhatnagar, 1999, p. 69).

Even greater can be the problems of transfer from more advanced countries to developing ones, such as the failure of several public administration reform processes in Latin America or other regions of the world already have shown. The World Bank and other international institutions support has depended on the attention paid by the beneficiary countries to those IT policies considered as the correct ones by the lending organizations. This coercive isomorphism has been accompanied by a mimetic isomorphism, which implies that the political and economic elites who have been trained in the United States or in Great Britain have considered these countries’ electronic government initiatives as examples to follow. As a consequence, important attributes, such as an inadequate technological infrastructure, an unstable political environment, a limited local skills base, an important restriction on money, or a wide acceptance of patronage practices, have not been taken into consideration when designing digital government solutions. This lack of knowledge frequently has led to partial or total project failure.

The second component that Heeks and Bhatnagar (1999) cited is the organization within which the technology is located. This has an organizational culture, a political dimension, a set of overt or covert management strategies related to change, and both formal and informal structures. Specifically, the public organization is a bureaucratic one. Therefore, electronic government initiatives are necessarily conditioned by the obstacles and problems to which this type of structure gives rise, such as referring all political decisions to the law, stressing a culture of legality, emphasizing senior public managers’ control over extremely predictable and rational processes, impeding adaptation to new times as a result of its slow nature, and avoiding quality-oriented structures (Gascó, 2005).

This assertion explains why private sector information technology practices that have proved to be successful often fail when they are transferred to public administration. Failure is not only a consequence of the broadly studied and analyzed dissimilarities that exist between the private and the public sectors, such as pursuing different objectives, being accountable to different stakeholders, or having different types of customers (Allison, 1983), but is a consequence of the prevailing public administration culture. In sum, “government is not a business. Forcing governments into private sector thinking usually causes more problems than it solves” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 20).

PUBLIC OFFICIALS’ RESPONSES TO INNOVATION: RESILIENCE TO CHANGE

The difficulties that arise from the implementation of imitative electronic government strategies within the bureaucratic public organizations give rise to feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty among their employees, which minimizes the likelihood of project accomplishment. Although, generally speaking, resistance to change has been widely accepted as a natural reaction, it is cited, however, as one of the major obstacles that the public sector faces when trying to implement any sort of change (Kearns, 2004). Just as any other government program, digital government initiatives can lead to failure due to the public servants’ negative responses and attitudes about the changes being implemented.

Private companies also may be affected by resistance to innovation projects. Nevertheless, the two conception-reality gaps mentioned in the previous section in relation to the introduction of electronic government programs aggravate the public sector employees’ resistances to change in comparison to the opposition experienced by the private arena staff. Although it is important to notice that imitation policies usually do not bring about the necessary commitment from the upper and middle public managers (they are often perceived as imposed strategies), reluctance to electronic government projects is mainly the result of the public sector bureaucracy’s attributes. Thus, its job definition and tasks precision, its routines and procedures uniformity, its hierarchical structure, its isolated departments, its organization continuity, its risk aversion, and its reliability are some of the bureaucratic structure characteristics that give rise to a close system based on certainty and exact prevision, a system that is perceived by its members as a stable and secure one (Gascó, 2003, 2005).

Given this environment, the introduction of electronic government actions may result either in resistance to change due to a lack of clear evidence about its positive impact (Heeks & Davis, 1999) or technology enactment in ways that reproduce, preserve, or even strengthen the ongoing social relationships and performance programs (Fountain, 2001, 2002). Since the use of information technology generally leads to uncertain and unexpected organizational changes, the most common reaction to innovation projects is distrust. Kearns (2004) maintained that organizational change usually is related to information technology and can take many forms. According to her, technology may provoke changes in service delivery, business processes, people’s roles and responsibilities, or structures and facilities.

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