

The Dubai E-Government Project

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INTRODUCTION

Ranked 26th worldwide and second in the Middle East for its e-government initiative, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Dubai, in particular, is an excellent example of how e-government might be developed, implemented and advanced as a customer service-based concept (West, 2005).

The e-government project that continues to evolve in Dubai can be credited almost exclusively to the Emirate's leadership as embodied in Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, his vision and sheer tenacity to make grand ideas a reality.

It is not our intention in this article to suggest that the Dubai e-government project is without challenges and room for improvement. It is our intention, though, to present the Dubai case study as an evolving example of e-government from which to learn.

While the development and implementation of the e-government project is advancing in Dubai at a frenetic pace, the rollout of the concept to the public and the general acceptance and inclusion of the public in the larger governance process is still, to a large extent, a masterful work in progress.

The general global assessment of e-government delivery undertaken by Darrell West (2005) makes it very clear that progress is being witnessed worldwide when it comes to the implementation of e-government ideals. The greatest challenge to e-government, according to West (2005), is at times its very slow pace, its uneven nature and failure to adapt to changing conditions within which it exists. Dubai, in some instances to a lesser degree and others to a greater degree, is experiencing the same problems being experienced globally by those engaged in implementing e-government.

Fortunately, e-government performance in Dubai is improving rapidly, as budget, bureaucracy and institutional forces are pushed towards compliance. But what continues to be fundamentally lacking from Dubai's e-government project is a means of promoting and facilitating authentic e-governance where society as a whole has a means of engaging in meaningful interaction as a participant in the process of governance and not simply the service side of the state.

Dubai is one of seven Emirates that constitute the UAE federation. The country's constitution identifies it as an

Arab state, with Islam as its religion and Arabic as its official language. The UAE is a member of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional group that joins the Gulf states of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE and Oman. In general, GCC countries share many political, economic and social characteristics, including high reliance on an imported work force.

In the last decade, Dubai and the UAE have undergone phenomenal change. Fifty years ago, the country had little to no electricity, plumbing or simple infrastructure, such as surfaced roads and bridges. In 1950, there was no hospital and but a single school in Dubai. Dubai was a city comprised of barasti huts (housing made from palm fencing) and clay buildings lining sand streets. As late as the 1970s, according to Timothy Walters (unpublished), the literacy rate of the UAE hovered around 20%, with only a fraction of adults having any formal education.

Today, the landscape of Dubai has been radically transformed. Dubai is experiencing a level of prosperity never before seen. Physically, the city has been morphed from a sleepy regional trading post to the premier economic and tourist hub of the Middle East.

The transformation of Dubai is marked by its rapid installation of a modern infrastructure, the embracing of technology and both the vision and resources to rapidly roll out change to the general population. In 1999, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum championed the idea of launching a visionary e-government project to set the standard for such endeavours in the Middle East. More recently, in 2005, the idea of a government connecting to at least a large segment of its constituents is quickly becoming a reality.

This article will review why we believe Dubai might be considered an excellent e-government case study in the implementation of e-government as a customer-service concept. This article will also suggest that one of the greatest challenges of any e-government project is to include governance in the equation. This examination is primarily based on a synthesis of government publications available through the e-government portal www.dubai.ae, where examples of the e-government exercise are available, with other accounts of the Dubai e-government project.

BACKGROUND

According to the UAE Ministry of Economy and Planning, the UAE's population in 2003 was estimated to be 4.041 million (Dubai Development and Investment Authority, 2005). Dubai is the UAE's most populous city, with an estimated population of 1.071 million. Census results from 2000 shows that 80% of Dubai's population is comprised of expatriates. According to official government statistics, UAE nationals constitute 18% of the country's population, followed by other Arabs expatriates at 13%, Asians 63% and Europeans and others 4%. Dubai's population is similar in its diversity to the nation at large (Datadubai.com, 2005; Dubai Development and Investment Authority, 2005).

The diverse expatriate population of Dubai uses language as one tool of cultural expression and interaction. While English is the dominant language in the business and tourism industries, government agencies use both Arabic and English to cater for the Emirate's residents and visitors. In addition, Urdu, Hindi, Farsi, Tagalog, and Russian, along with other languages, are also widely used on a daily basis. Most schools in Dubai offer one or two languages as additional foreign languages for non-native speakers.

International schools in Dubai cater to the myriad of nationalities living in the Emirate. Expatriate children are not admitted to the UAE public schools in the country; therefore, they study in private institutions. Local authorities have licensed K-12 schools offering Lebanese, British, American, French, International Baccalaureate and Indian curricula, to name just a few. American, Canadian and British-styled institutions of higher learning also provide higher studies to nationals and expatriates.

Dubai also plays a role as an international trading site. With an advanced infrastructure that includes world-class ports, airport, roads, free zones, a financial center, banks, insurance sector and retail outlets, to name just a few, Dubai attracts business as well as leisure visitors year round. To promote itself as a trade destination, the Dubai government organizes an annual shopping festival that attracts millions of visitors. In addition, it organizes a summer program of shopping and hotel promotions to revive the local economy during the months when temperatures soar and local residents take their annual leave abroad.

Dubai is one of the Middle East's most successful tourism destinations. According to the World Tourism Organization, Dubai has witnessed steady positive growth as a destination for the past decade, with only a marginal decline during periods of regional wars and instability. In 2002, Dubai achieved 31% growth in tourist arrivals—the world's highest for the year. In 2003, Dubai guests reached 4,980,228, with the majority coming from other Arab coun-

tries, Europe, Africa, Russia and the CIS republics and Asia. There is no question that Dubai is a city state in the throgs of rapid development.

THE IDEA OF E-GOVERNMENT

E-government can be defined as the electronic enablement of services provided or commissioned by the public sector specifically capitalizing upon applications of information and communication technology (ICT) tools to the wide range of service activities undertaken by the state.

The goal of any e-government project is to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of a government's activities and, in many instances, alter the procedural relationship of the government with the public. This altered government/public relationship typically progresses through several distinct phases, according to Sami Atallah (2001): posting information; two-way communication; exchange of value; integrated service and exchange.

The move towards e-government by many first-world countries is fundamentally altering the government/public relationship on one hand and citizen/business relationship on the other. In the Middle East, change in the government/public and citizen/business relationship is no different.

What is different in the Middle East is the relationship of e-government to e-governance. In many democratic-styled countries, e-government and e-governance projects are being developed concurrently. E-governance might best be understood as the electronic enablement and management of democratic activities, ensuring a degree of fairness, transparency and ultimately participation in the public-policy process of the otherwise disenfranchised (Bovaird, 2005).

E-governance is less about access and more about the style and intent of leadership. E-governance, as Khosrow-Pour (2005) suggests, is about enabling new ways of debating and deciding public policy. E-governance is less an economic investment and more an investment in the populous itself, thereby facilitating a new means of listening and consulting the citizenship.

E-governance, thus, becomes about enabling democratic tendencies and efficient government. The ideals of e-governance are being talked about today across the Middle East in general, but have yet to be adopted in any meaningful way, including in the UAE.

Sami Atallah (2001) suggests that the most striking effect of e-government is seen in the enhancement of the communicative ability of governments. But e-government is not simply the reinvention of the communication structures of governments. E-government is the reinvention of the way the business of governance is conducted. From information delivery, service procurement and delivery,

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