E–Government Issues in Switzerland

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INTRODUCTION

This short article gives an overview of e-government in Switzerland about 10 years after its introduction at the municipal, cantonal and federal levels. It outlines the technical and political difficulties recently encountered for the further development of online services at all levels and presents some good examples of what has been achieved so far. Opportunities for e-participation are also presented as a growing trend based on a few e-voting experiments at cantonal level. Since Switzerland is a multicultural country with four national languages, some of its e-government experiences and "lessons learned" can be useful in neighbouring countries with the same cultural background (i.e., Austria, France, Germany, and Italy).

BACKGROUND

The term "e-government" (*cyberadministration* in French, *governo elettronico* in Italian, but interestingly, *e-government* in German on the site www.admin.ch/ch/d/egov) has been used in Switzerland (and its national languages) for around 10 years now: the first public Internet sites were launched by the city of Geneva and the Canton of Basel in December 1994. As of 1995, the Confederation inaugurated its main site, (www.admin.ch), to which were grafted, little by little, the seven Federal ministries. By the end of 1999, all the Swiss Cantons had official sites. In 2005, nearly all Swiss municipalities had a homepage. Only 59% of them, however, have a well developed site, whereas the others make do with mini-sites hosted by the Confederation or by their Canton. Today, a directory of official Internet sites in the public sector that is maintained by IDHEAP (www.gov.ch) contains around 2000 URLs. On an international level, Switzerland position has worsened over the past years: From 7th (in 2003) to 9th (in 2004) place in the World Economic Forum Network Readiness Index (WEF, 2005); from 15th to 20th place in the European Union Online Availability of Services study (DGISM, 2004), and from 11th to 62nd place in the Brown University Global E-Government Study (Brown University, 2004). See also (eVanti.ch, 2005).

Despite the efforts made over these 10 years, the barometer of e-government published in 2005 by the University of Applied Sciences, Bern (Brücher & Biswanger, 2004) reveals that public Internet sites are not well known by the population: the figures range from 51% of those taking the survey being aware of their cities' sites, to 41% for their canton's site, to 29% of them for the Confederation's site, and only 6% for the Swiss "national" portal, www.ch.ch. Moreover, the existing sites are only used by 14% of inhabitants, although 80% of the population has Internet access at their homes or offices. In addition, half of the surfers do not trust these public sites sufficiently to entrust them with their data. Finally there are few administrative services available online on a transactional basis: 493 communes offer such e-procedures out of 1,822 communes with a Web site, and only nine of them have more than 10 e-procedures (Barbey & Abbet, 2004).

Good examples of e-government, nevertheless, exist in Switzerland (see the following paragraph), and there is a need for sharing these among specialists. This, notably, is the role of the eVanti project (www.eVanti.ch), an initiative on the part of the Swiss Confederation that is similar to the approaches taken in the European Union (Good Practice Framework) and in the United States of America (Best Practices Committee). The conferences organised in 2004 and 2005 by eVanti.ch, presented a first qualitative panorama of what is taking place in the cantons and cities of Switzerland, as well as at Federal level (see for example, eVanti.ch, 2004a, 2004b, and 2005). A common language is necessary, and if possible, one exempt of poorly-understood American-English terminology. We should drop the "e" in front of each concept, as suggested by a seminal European report (Leitner, 2003), and concentrate on a comprehension of the "Internetisation" phenomenon in the public sector, in Switzerland as abroad.

THE SWISS E-GOVERNMENT ICEBERG

On the basis of the experiences presented during the evanti conferences, we can affirm that an "e-government iceberg" exists in Switzerland as in many countries. The tip that is visible is constituted by the technical problems that this type of high-tech project cannot fail to encounter

and that often overwhelm discussion of it. But, as is the case for all icebergs, the part below the surface—meaning the other problems—is even larger than the part that is visible. There are in fact a multitude of other problems.

First of all, the bubble of the "new economy" exploded at the beginning of the 21st century, and there is now less enthusiasm for the Internet and thus also for its use by administrative entities. We have seen that there is little popular interest for the public sites, and this has led to a lack of interest on the part of the politicians who must vote budgets and lead projects. Moreover, the crisis within Swiss public finances at all levels no longer makes it possible to release the budgets essential to developing sophisticated sites. There are sometimes legal grey zones (Brücher, 2004). We also note a lack of co-operation in this area between the municipalities and their Cantons, with notable exceptions such as the Glarus Canton and the Neuchâtel site with its secure portal (www.ne.ch) which is based on a 20-year-old IT co-operation between this canton and its 62 communes.

As Glassey and Chappelet (2003) revealed, a fair number of Internet strategies have been published by the authorities, but few are applied consistently. In many instances, it is a case of re-inventing the wheel rather than pooling tried and tested solutions. Most of the norms that the recently formed eCH association (www.ech.ch) is to draw up are not yet available. In short, then, e-government in Switzerland—as is also frequently the case elsewhere—is still far too much the domain of information technology experts and not that of users and decision-makers. The same errors made during the early stages of introducing information technology into the administrations during the 1970s and 1980s are recurring.

On a more political level, many think that federalism, a form of Government which is engrained in the Swiss political system, is a hindrance to the development of e-government in Switzerland (Melillo, 2005). To follow this line, however, one would have to explain why such federalist countries such as Austria and Canada are on top of the e-government rankings. It is more likely that the causes of Swiss e-government difficulties can be found elsewhere, for example in the lack of a single national identification number for inhabitants, in the total lack of coordination of the IT infrastructure between the Swiss cantons and Confederation, in the lack of a federal e-government law, as well as in the very slow start of digital signature schemes (OFCOM, 2004, p. 38).

SOME SOLUTIONS

Opportunities for a better e-government in Switzerland nevertheless abound. On a front office level, it is a case of facilitating relations with those administered in order to make these relations more practical and more user-friendly. The Canton of Vaud's Land Registry and its over three thousands daily subscriber visits is a good example (www.rf.vd.ch). In back office terms, it is a question of improving productivity and co-operation within the public service and of rendering administrative procedures transparent for those who use them. The CAMAC application, inaugurated in 2000, remains an exemplary case (www.camac.ch). This site links around 30 administrative services within the Canton of Vaud, the municipalities and those who issue tenders for construction work for the purpose of issuing construction permits faster and within the 30-day limit set my the law.

These cases of "Internetisation" all have tremendous potential for being more efficient (and thus creating savings). But we should not draw the line at achieving efficiency alone. The application of the Internet within administration can also be a catalyst for State reform inspired by the Reinventing Government movement as of the 1990s (Chappelet, 2004). Indeed, many Swiss e-government projects have been influenced by the ideas of New Public Management (Schedler, Summermatter, & Schmidt, 2003). Some examples follow.

The State must today be close to those it governs, and more transparent. The Swiss virtual front office (www.ch.ch), which provides information to inhabitants on administrative services and points them to the right source of information and at the right level, contributes to improved proximity although it is not well known yet. After a costly start, it is being reengineered to better fill the citizens' and businesses' needs. According to the New Managerialism ideas, the State must also become more entrepreneurial. The Swiss public markets' information system (www.simap.ch) facilitates this objective by stimulating competition and transparency regarding the purchase of goods and services by the Cantons, the major cities, and soon the Confederation. The State must also open up to new forms of public service provision. The SIMAP Association is an example of this. We could also mention the Municipality of Montreux Internet site, which is entirely outsourced to a private portal (www.montreux.ch), or the public/private partnership "Schools on the Net" intended to equip Swiss schools with Internet access and the teachers with the knowledge to make better use of Internet resources in their courses (www.PPP-esn.ch). Finally, the State should be more aware of its citizens' opinions. The experiences surrounding electronic voting in the Cantons of Geneva (www.geneve.ch/ge-vote), Neuchâtel and Zurich are making progress in this direction.

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