

# Exploring E-Government Benefits and Success Factors

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Over the last decade, information technologies (IT) have been considered one of the most influential ways to change organizations (Davenport, 1993; Ho, 2002; Laudon & Laudon, 2003). As early as 1986, Bozeman and Bretschneider suggested that different principles should be used when managing IT systems in public and private sector organizations (Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1986; Melitski, 2003). However, in a review of the literature, Rocheleau and Wu (2002) concluded that there remain a limited number of empirical studies that investigate whether there are differences between public and private sector organizations. Therefore, the research to-date about e-government is situated within multiple debates and draws from literature studying both public and private organizations.

In fact, there is also no clear consensus about the concept of electronic government. Descriptions are emerging. For example, Holden, Norris, and Fletcher (2003) reviewed the range of definitions other authors have proposed for e-government, and suggest there are some common elements. They mention

*e-government is or will become electronic and not paper based and may include the Web, e-mail, fax, telephone, or other electronic means of providing information and delivering services; available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week; and the provision of information and the delivery of services (of varying types and degrees of complexity and integration). (p. 327)*

## BACKGROUND

There is another debate in progress about the benefits and consequences of e-government among academics, practitioners, and within the populace. Historical evidence suggests that IT investments in government over the last couple of decades have increased significantly. Similarly, a growing body of literature continues to study the impact of IT investment and use on the performance of public

organizations (Lee & Perry, 2002). However, some commentators believe that information technology, specifically electronic government, has not accomplished the promise of a more efficient, effective, decentralized and democratic public administration (Garson, 2004; Kramer & King, 2003).

Theoretically thus far, there have been two dominant approaches to understanding electronic government benefits and success factors. The first emphasizes the transformational power of information technologies and their impacts on organizational structures and outcomes. In this tradition, findings suggest clear and positive effects from using information technologies in organizational settings. A vast corpus of research is dedicated to identifying and analyzing these potential benefits (Dawes, 1996; Moon, 2002; OECD, 2003; O'Looney, 2002).

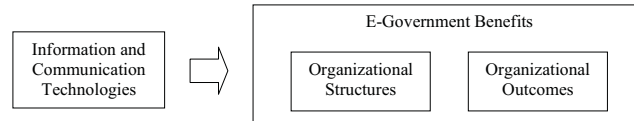
The second approach reflects on the impact of organizational, institutional, and contextual factors regarding the selection, design, and use of information technologies (Caffrey, 1998; Dawes & Pardo, 2002; Garson, 2003; Landsbergen & Wolken, 2001; Laudon, 1985; Pardo & Scholl, 2002). This academic tradition seeks to understand how different factors affect or shape the resulting information technology and subsequently, the resulting organizational outcomes as measures of IT success.

The first approach deals mainly with the impacts of IT on organizations and places emphasis on potential benefits (see Figure 1). The second perspective is more interested in identifying and analyzing different success factors and evaluating their importance for IT projects (see Figure 2). The two approaches are clearly related and complementary and important for understanding the e-government phenomenon (Gil-García, 2005). Both perspectives have contributed to our current understanding and the following sections present some of their main findings.

## BENEFITS OF E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Some authors note the tremendous positive impacts that information technology initiatives can have on govern-

*Figure 1. Characterizing e-government benefits (adapted from Gil-García, 2005)*



ment organizational structures and functions (Barrett & Greene, 2000; Brown & Brudney, 2003; O’Looney, 2002). Others suggest, “at least potentially, IT involves the transformation of the organizational culture of the government.” (Schelin, 2003, p. 125). Another approach is Garson’s decentralization-democratization theory where he states, “for democratization theorists, in the wake of the information revolution comes decentralization, because IT allows dramatic broadening of the span of control, and democratization, because knowledge, which is a critical basis of power, is also dispersed by IT.” (Garson, 2000, p. 592).

### **Benefits as Outcomes Only**

Benefits from information technology initiatives can be seen as being only the final outcomes from their use. In this view, benefits such as service quality, efficiency, or effectiveness seem to derive directly and almost automatically from the use of information technologies in organizations. These benefits are considered “the reasons for embracing e-government as a means of reforming public management and contributing to broader policy objectives.” (Ho, 2002; OECD, 2003, p. 28).

### **Improvement of Service Quality**

The goal of improving service quality was found in all the e-government policy statements examined in a recent international study (OECD, 2003). Customer-orientation is one of the most important ways in which governments have attempted to improve the quality of the services they provide to businesses and people. E-government initiatives have the potential to deliver better services. However, some problems of access diminish this potential (Garson, 2004). There are still some social groups that cannot enjoy the benefits of electronic services, or that cannot meaningfully obtain value from them (Mariscal, 2003; Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2003).

### **Efficiency and Cost Reduction**

“ICT use in government has often been driven by the need to reduce the call on resources, either to reduce

overall spending or to allocate funds to higher priority areas.” (OECD, 2003, p. 29). Many of the e-government initiatives that are closely related to efficiency can be grouped in the e-management component of e-government. Most of the examples mentioned by the OECD (2003) fall in this efficiency category, such as payment processes, procurement, payroll, and human resources management. However, some initiatives that were considered cornerstones of the cost-savings promise such as e-procurement, have performed poorly or even been abandoned (Garson, 2004).

### **Increased Policy Effectiveness**

Policy effectiveness is a recently identified benefit of e-government. In the past, information technologies were mostly related to cost savings and service quality. However, “... there is an increasing awareness that e-government initiatives can also help achieve important outcomes in major policy areas such as health, education, anti-crime initiatives, and security” (Brown & Brudney, 2003; OECD, 2003, p. 37).

### **Active Public Participation and Transparency**

More in some countries than in others, e-government initiatives are also seen as promoting accountability and public participation. The relationship between governments and citizens involves many very important social and political factors. For instance, e-democracy initiatives do not refer only to online voting, but also to communication exchange between elected officials and citizens (Davis, Elin, & Reeher, 2002). However, electronic channels have been used by people who are not representative of the citizens’ interests and politicians have noticed that these forums are not very helpful for their reelection purposes (Garson, 2004).

### **Benefits as Organizational Structures and Outcomes**

Potential benefits from the use of information technologies are not only final outcomes, but also transformations in the organizational structures and the interactions among

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