Facing the E–Government Challenges within Catalonia

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2001-2004 period the main pursuit by the AOC (Administració Oberta de Catalunya or Open Administration of Catalonia) was to create a well defined setup and devoloped CAT365 portal, the citizen's portal[1]. This portal would offer a new space on the Internet (as a complement of presencial and phone channels) through the creation of a brand new CAT 365 which belonged to everybody, but without being associated with any administration in particular. This portal would allow the user to reach the required information and to do transactions online. This could be done in an integrated way and within the user's own scope through an organisation based on natural sets (life events) and without relation to the current competencial organisation.

This model legitimated by the Parlamentarial Pact was signed and agreed in summer 2001 by all the parlamentarial political parties in Catalonia, together with the local public administrations and with the Generalitat of Catalonia (the Autonomous Catalan Administration). In Autumm 2004 it reached a crisis point and, therefore, it was reviewed.

BACKGROUND

During a certain stage of development of e-government there has been and there still is the paradigm of creating a portal where one can concentrate all the information, interactions, and procedures of any public administration, a single portal which can act as a distributor of public services, and one where the citizens can easily find the services they need independently of the administration that finally offers the service. This is a model where the division of the roles of service provider and service distributor takes place: the role of provision is played by the administration which owns and delivers the service and allows a third party to distribute these services. This has been the model adopted by the Catalan public administrations in the AOC project where within the setting of the AOC consortium a public entity has been created with the participation of the autonomic administration (Generalitat de Catalunya) and the local administration (via Localret, the consortium of local bodies for the Information Society) with the aim of using telematic channels, mainly internet and telephone, to distribute the services of the Catalan public administrations. This model reached a crisis point and therefore it was reviewed. I think it was an impeccable model from a conceptual view. The problem was that at that moment the model did not fit with the Catalan Administration's situation. My opinion is that we have been going through a development of the initial model is not a replacement by a new one. Most of the objectives of this latest model were already in the initial one; in fact, there is a nuance and a strength difference between both models but not in their chief meaning. To understand deeply the reasons why the AOC1 did not achieve success I would recommend reading the article written by M. Sanromà, "Digital Administration: A New Way to Manage Public Administration Information".

The aim of this article is to explain the principal characteristics of the new model through some of the products that have been developed and are being developed within the AOC setting. The mission of the AOC project is the same: improving the relationship between the Catalan public administrations and their citizens, companies and entities, but the project is currently accentuating the development of solutions that increase interadministrative collaboration and allow the procedures to be simplified or eliminated, such as the integration of information on public services—in an early stage—in order to integrate the procedure at a later stage. The idea underlying this strategy is that in order to improve the relationships between administrations and citizens, a parallel improvement in relationships between administrations must take place. To this end the AOC project is developing solutions (some of which are described here) with an ASP[2] philosophy. In this way all the different Catalan public administrations will have access to the solutions necessary so that any of them may move towards e-government without any individual administration having to develop solutions on its own, thus producing clear savings due to economies of scale. Among these solutions we find the modules known as common or corporate modules: electronic registration of incoming and outgoing correspondence, a notice and warning platform via e-mail or SMS, and the notification module. These are only some of many examples.

Although we are aware of the need to use tools which could simplify and improve the relations within Catalan administrations, the AOC is currently providing solutions which allow sharing communication and doing transactions online among them. Its aims are as follows:

- The Consortium AOC is changing the model from a "front-office" integration to a "back-office" integration approach.
- The business focus will be on horizontal e-services across different governmental agencies.
- Web services and data integration is the keystone of a new Integration Architecture.
- An interoperability framework and common metadata models will be defined.
- The impact on the activity of the Consortium AOC will be measured on internal efficiency and cost optimisation.
- The Consortium AOC must provide safeguards around the sharing of people's information among government agencies.
- There will be collaboration of private sector i key (i.e., change of adress, e-invoicing, etc.).

THE VISION OF THE ADMINISTRATION AND THAT OF THE CITIZENS

The reality and the behaviour of people and organisations fit better with a network model than a hierarchy. Despite this generalised statement, in the field of public administration its history has over a long period of time shaped some hierarchical organisations, oriented towards a vertical management of its competences. It is true that in the latest decades some concepts such as transversality have been introduced in the work of the administration, but it is also true that in the majority of cases it tries to respond to problems generated by the lack of a strategic vision which derives from the verticalisation of administrative management. The benefits of its application have not gone beyond the sphere of the administration itself and have not extended to cover its necessary relations with other levels of administration.

We find ourselves then, on one side, with an administration that functions as a perfectly organised whole where every territorial administration counts on some perfectly defined and fixed competences, with a complex organisation but one organised through hierarchies of power and which seem to be inspired by those perfect and pure Hegelian views of the world where everything works like a well-oiled watch. The main aim of this whole is to administrate, manage the public resources, and offer services to the citizens in the most effective and efficient way. On the other side we find ourselves with the citizen, lately referred to as a "client" (since the traditional techniques and strategies of the private sector moved into the public sector) who, in sum, are users and consumers of public services who feel overwhelmed when facing the administration. They do not understand it but frequently have to put up with it. They are conscious that they have to deal with it from time to time, but they think that the less frequently, the better.

SOME EXAMPLES AND SOLUTIONS

In Catalonia (and in Spain) there are three coexisting levels of administration, each with important competences: the local, autonomic and central administrations. The current legal code fixes the spheres of activity for each of them; therefore, we are looking at a scene which is perfectly established and fitting from the administrative and legal point of view, but not from the citizen's point of view. The citizen is often a victim of competential distribution which is illogical in terms of access. It is simply impossible to understand. Furthermore, the distribution of competences between the different administrations is unstable; therefore, the perception of the citizen when it comes to choosing a service to cover a need is, to say the least, one of disorientation.

In the real world each administration has a list of competences that it should carry out, a territorial sphere of activity, and the resources to carry out its aims. Consequently, each administration has in recent years been developing solutions, with different degrees of sophistication and efficiency, in areas of e-government service provision to its citizens.

Traditionally the different administrations have been distributing their services through the new channels that the new technologies of information and communication allowed, focusing on those spheres of activity where they had competencies, as was logical. For each administration the citizen (understood in a broader sense to include companies and entities) was "its" citizen. Each administration tried to improve its services using new channels to deal with its citizens but limited its sphere of activities to the strictly defined space of its competences. The result of this commendable effort was the reproduction, now in a digital environment, of the citizen's perception of fragmentation in the supply of public services.

There are many procedures which are located in the sphere of activity of a single administration. The complete process starts and ends in organisms depending on the same administration. Nevertheless, on numerous occasions the citizen will have to show particular attributes

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