

Immigration and Digital Government

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INTRODUCTION

The information age of the 21st century has transformed the economic, social, and political landscape in a profound and indelible manner. It also has changed the role and functions of government and redefined the scope and substance of good governance. Never before in human history has the pace of structural change been more pervasive, rapid, and global in its context. The information age has precipitated profound structural changes in the economic landscape and has given birth to the new economy. The new global economy is composed of a trilogy of interactive forces that include globalization, trade liberalization, and the information technology and communications revolution. Globalization has melted national borders, free trade has enhanced economic integration, and the information and communications revolution has made geography and time irrelevant (Passaris, 2001). Immigration has taken on a new perspective in the context of globalization. There is no denying that the spread of Internet-based technologies throughout society has become the dominant economic reality of the 21st century. E-economy—the use of information and communication technologies for product and process innovation across all sectors of the economy—has emerged as the primary engine of productivity and growth for the global economy. In large part due to advances in information and communications technologies, the role of international borders in this globalized economy has been transformed from the traditional geographical frontiers to virtual economic communities.

Innovations in transportation and information and communications technology also has impacted immigration flows and made the world, in the phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan (1988), truly a “global village”. Borders have become less relevant for digital content communications and transactions. Cyberspace has no natural demarcations or border patrols. Indeed, knowledge-based products, such as software, games, and music, cross borders without impediment and with relative ease (Passaris, 2003).

The advent of the information age has had a profound impact on the nature and scope of e-government and has given birth to the digital government of the 21st century. In particular, the interface between government and immi-

gration management has been redesigned and restructured in terms of access to immigration information and application forms, the processing of immigration applicants for admission, enforcement of security measures and the prevention of terrorist infiltration, and the time line for adjudicating immigration applications, to name just a few of the significant changes to the contemporary process by which the governments of immigrant-receiving countries enforce their immigration policies.

BACKGROUND

There is no denying that the information age has resulted in a significant restructuring between the interface of government and immigration. Furthermore, the new economy has altered the microeconomic and macroeconomic dynamics in the pattern and flow of immigration in the 21st century. Indeed, the most important factor driving the changes in immigration is economic globalization (Burstin & Biles, 2003). In this context, economic migrants are driving the immigration agenda in the information age.

In this borderless world, financial capital travels the world, going to wherever it can earn the highest return. Human capital has become equally mobile, much like financial capital, pursuing the highest expected return in terms of employment opportunities and financial remuneration. The flow of human capital through migration has become an increasingly important issue in this context (Passaris, 1999).

Migration flows in the 21st century are taking place in the context of the new global economy. The advent of globalization, the preponderance of regional trading blocks, and the emergence of the knowledge-based economy are the signature marks of the new global economy of the 21st century. The industrial/agrarian economic model of the past that determined the scope and substance of immigration patterns has been replaced by the pursuit of immigration for the purpose of enhancing a country's technological capacity and optimizing its human and social capital endowment. In this regard, the importance of human capital has redefined the quantitative and qualitative parameters of the modern dynamics for immigration flows. Indeed, in the current context, the

economic wealth of nations is determined not by the quantity of a country's natural endowments and physical resources but by the level of technological skills and educational attainment of its labor force (Florida, 2002).

The new century has introduced significant changes in the geopolitical landscape, which is reflected in the economic disparity between developed and developing nations on the international landscape. It is also underlined in the emergence of national security and combating terrorism as a principal priority for governments through redefining public policy with respect to immigration. It also has heightened concerns regarding the magnitude of illegal immigration.

The pattern of global migrations experienced a fundamental restructuring toward the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. An economic realignment has taken place as a consequence of globalization, which has redefined countries of emigration and countries of immigration. This was precipitated by the profound structural changes in the economic landscape and the emergence of a new pattern of pull-and-push forces impacting migration flows. In particular, the traditional delineation of immigrant-receiving and emigrant-sending countries has been altered significantly. In this context, the leading source countries of emigration are currently the transition countries in Europe as well as the developing countries in Asia, Africa, and South America. Furthermore, countries of southern Europe such as Spain, Italy, and Greece, who until recently were countries of emigration, have been transformed into countries of immigration. It is also worth noting that the structural transformation of the national economies of developed countries and especially immigrant-receiving countries has had an indelible impact on the economic profile of recent immigrants.

INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

A central feature associated with the microeconomic foundations of the migration process is the accumulation and dissemination of relevant and reliable information. Indeed, a necessary prerequisite regarding the decision to emigrate is the process of acquiring accurate knowledge and data that are essential precedents for an effective evaluation and assessment of the costs and benefits related to migrating (Passaris, 1989). The advent of the information age and new digital technologies have enhanced the information axiom that is relevant to the flow of immigration. There is no denying that the magnitude and quality of the economic, political, social, and cultural information and data to which prospective migrants have access forms an important component of the decision-

making process leading to emigration. It is in this context that digital government has had the most profound impact.

Text in many languages and personal experiences are the two major catalysts for transmitting information and knowledge. Prospective migrants are likely to garner the information they need for a comparison between conditions and prospects in their country of origin with those in their country of destination from books, articles, pamphlets, interviews with immigration officers, holiday visits to the country of intended destination, contacts with residents of the country of destination, and correspondence with relatives and friends residing in that country of intended migration. Increasingly, this information is retrieved on the Internet from government Web sites, portals of immigration organizations, e-mails, and other forms of virtual connectivity.

MULTICULTURAL IMMIGRATION

A feature of contemporary consequence with respect to immigration is the influx of a pronounced multicultural and multiracial flow of immigrant streams (Economic Council of Canada, 1991). It is anticipated that future immigration flows will be from non-traditional source countries and even more multicultural and multiracial in composition (Passaris, 1988). This underlines the need for a more vigorous assessment of the scope and substance of immigration information and the format of its electronic dissemination. In particular, digital government in immigrant-receiving countries will require a polyglot realignment in the immigration information provided on their Web sites, forms, and portals.

In many respects, an immigrant-receiving country's multicultural profile is a valuable economic asset and should be utilized strategically in the formulation of public policy. The presence of this multitude of cultures provides an opportunity to develop special economic relationships all over the world (Passaris, 1987b). The multicultural, multiracial, multifaith, and multilingual character of contemporary immigrant-receiving countries should become an important component of the scope and substance of digital government, especially in the area of immigration.

In the new global economy, multicultural immigration offers the receiving country a set of competitive strengths and enhanced economic development strategies. The multicultural skills and attributes of immigrant arrivals should be harnessed for competitive advantage in such areas of vital economic importance as enhanced international trade and export potential, building overseas business contacts, attracting foreign investments, tourist

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