

Successful Implementation of an E-Government Project

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INTRODUCTION

Challenged to multiple pressures, the administration developed many initiatives aimed at modernizing its practices and offering the citizen customer (Thomas, 1999) a faster and better-quality service (OECD, 1996). From this perspective, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is presented as an essential means of modernization (Pouillet & Van Bastelaer, 1999). However, the declarations of intent sometime seem to be difficult to translate into efficient projects integrated in civil servants' daily work practices. A lot of case studies focus on best practices or analyze the reasons of failure of several e-government projects. There are fewer studies that position upstream and try to identify the key success factors of the introduction of ICTs into public services regarding their acceptance and appropriation by internal users.

BACKGROUND

A review of the literature devoted to micro-analysis of e-government projects shows a primacy of perspectives focused on the impacts of these projects (on organization performance or services offered to citizens). Indeed, we note that the large majority of studies mentioned in the literature are centered on the effects produced by the introduction of ICTs into administrations or on individuals concerned with the change. They particularly consider work organization, frequency rate and use of the suggested systems. Other types of approaches are less frequent. Although several authors mention its interest, research focused on the context of e-government projects' implementation remains limited. Far from simply fitting into a reproduction process (automation of existing tasks or processes), ICTs are carrying certain organizational presuppositions (Alsène, 1990) that cannot be congruent with the context in which they are developed. In this respect, it appears essential to consider the specificities of the particular context of public administration. Several authors (Jae Moon, 2002; Jae Moon & Norris, 2005) stress the importance of considering contextual specificities, showing that some institutional factors can contribute to the adoption of e-government or have technical implica-

tions on project design (Riedl, 2003). Similarly, Heeks (2003, 2005) identifies "design-reality gaps" as potential explanations of e-government failures: According to him, success or failure of the e-government project depends on the size of the gap between current realities of the situation (the context of the project) and the design proposal for new e-government projects.

In addition, there is a need for considering non-technical factors (representations, attitudes, motivations, reactions, etc.) in the analysis of innovation processes. We observe that the process of e-government project management, the way they are introduced within the administration, do not constitute the majority of researches. The technological project management or the changes that such projects suppose were certainly approached (Alsène & Denis, 1994; Boddy & Buchanan, 1986; Rhodos & Wield, 1985), but seldom in the context of the public administration. We can quote in particular Grabow et al. (2002), and Ho and Pardo (2004), but the latter do not identify specific success factors for public administrations. Adopting a more upstream position, Jae Moon and Norris (2005) explore the effect of managerial innovativeness in municipal government on the adoption of e-government and its outcomes. Their study finds an association between managerial innovation orientation and the adoption of e-government at the local level. Nevertheless, it does not focus specifically on e-government project management, but on government management in a larger perspective. The management style adopted can be considered as a potential success factor of the e-government project. Some studies (Eddowes, 2004; Heeks, 2003) examine both the relevance and availability of methodologies and techniques suited to the implementation of e-government or propose techniques to reduce the risks of e-government failures.

In this context, we propose to consider these two dimensions simultaneously (consideration of the context and process of project management) and illustrate their influence with two case studies carried out in Belgium. The central question of the analysis is the effective use of digital projects by the internal actors of the administration, their satisfaction and their appropriation of proposed tools. Within the framework of this article, we will only develop the intra-administration perspective, and

will not consider the aspects linked to the relationship with the citizen.

The analysis of uses shows a frequent shift between desired uses (i.e., the initial purposes assigned with a project) and the effective uses, or the way in which the tools are used on a daily basis. This observed shift often leads to an acknowledgement of failure of the project or, at best, an under-utilization of the system. ICTs, which are too often considered as simple technical objects, are carrying organizational changes and are the result of interactions between their users and the context of implementation. Consequently, we can usefully mobilize the contextualist analytical framework, whose specificity is to understand organizational phenomena by considering the elements of the context likely to influence them. Accordingly, we refer to the approach proposed by Pettigrew (1985, 1987, 1990), in which he articulates the *content*, referring to the dimension submitted to the change (here: the e-government project), its *context* (factors likely to influence the content and its evolution) and the *process* (the complex interplay of power relationships among various actors concerned with the transformation of the organization).

Consequently, our analysis focuses on the factors that influence, and even structure, the uses, from the design of the project to its effective implementation within the organization. This analysis, combined with empirical observation, leads to formulation of some management observations relative to the necessary consideration of the context and the management process likely to optimize the uses of the installed tools.

This text is based on two case studies carried out within the framework of two research projects in public administrations. The first study examines the modernization of an inter-departmental human resources database managed by a central federal department, was generally perceived as a failure: Users did not use the proposed tool and showed no appropriation of it, and this under-utilization led to its abandonment. The second analysis, the development of a municipal intranet aimed at easing and stimulating the interactions between the different administrative services of the town, was a genuine success in terms of utilization, appropriation and satisfaction of the users.

The common point between these two cases is their aim to inter-connect and stimulate the collaboration and exchange of content between various departments of the same political decision level.

We use a qualitative methodology for both cases, consisting on one hand of interviews with the promoters and originators of the project as well as internal users within the administration, and a documents analysis on the other hand. For each of the two cases, we will present:

- The contextual variables, whose consideration supported the success or, on the contrary, whose non-consideration can be identified as a factor of failure, or at the very least a source of difficulties in the setting of the project
- The processual variables, namely, dimensions which, when were integrated in piloting and the setting of the project, supported a successful introduction of ICTs into the administration and *a contrario* when they were neglected, led to an under-utilization and then consequently an abortion of the system. These variables are mainly focused on the consideration of the actors and their interests, and the power games surrounding the project.

CASE STUDY 1: THE MUNICIPAL E-ADMINISTRATION

These municipal authorities simultaneously set several e-administration projects both for the citizens and personnel. We will focus only on the projects intended for the latter (internal tools, back-office tools) or on the internal aspects of the projects developed for citizens (not the interfaces between citizen and civil servants).

This local administration has been involved for several years in many projects related to the introduction of ICTs, wishing to be perceived as an up-to-date administration. This wish, held by the burgomaster, was relayed at the political level, and was also made effective through collaboration with the private sector. This collaboration was translated in a computing equipment acquisition at very low cost for the administration.

In terms of equipment, the municipal authorities were equipped with several workstations in a local network (Intranet) with high capacity (an optical fiber installed by the municipality), connecting all services and establishments of the municipal authorities, based in several villages. All systems were developed simultaneously in the same computing environment, with the same ergonomics. This total standardization of the computing environment aimed at an easier appropriation of the various applications that will allow, in the long term, the mobility of agents in the various administrative offices.

The ICT process of these municipal authorities has led to the installation of an Autonomous Office to accompany the process, to free bureaucratic constraints more easily. Thus, the authorities decided to create a public limited company, whose objective was computing and communication in the municipality and, later on, the marketing of what was developed by other administrations.

The autonomous office was directed by a board of directors (majority of administrators designated among

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