

Chapter XVIII

E-Lectons in New Zealand Local Government

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide governments are investing in initiatives to open access to information, resources, communication and services via channels typically used for electronic commerce. Government agencies are usually the leaders in communication technology commonly developed primarily for military use and later adopted by the general public. Since its inception, the Internet has gained widespread usage, prompting governments to provide online services to the public. The broad category for this type of information and services provision is called “e-government.” It is the general description of a way to provide better access to government information and services. According to the New Zealand e-government strategy (Clifford, 2003) the Internet will be used to improve the quality of the services and provide greater opportunities to participate in the democratic process for the citizens.

E-government is now emerging as a viable method of offering a good number of government services—from local to global. Central govern-

ment now provides services such as immigration, social services, income protection, and student loan applications through the Internet. Locally, city, and regional authorities can arrange rubbish collection and traffic fine payment, amongst other things, online.

One of the services necessary to maintain this interaction still has a stigma of being “*not quite ready*” for the Internet—online elections. Because elections govern the process of appointing government officials, they are an essential part of a democratic government (e-democracy).

Compared with the larger central governments, the local government segment has a better opportunity to innovate in the elections field. The process of online elections is however very similar between the two types of government. Both require the same basic steps of registering, voting, counting votes, and presenting the election results. In local online elections, there is higher potential for technical and political innovation and a realistic possibility that technology developed for it could later be used for the large-scale central government elections.

BACKGROUND

Mahoney (2002) identified the goals of e-government as improving customer service, internal efficiency, and citizen engagement. E-government initiatives are gaining momentum worldwide; they are seen as an *innovation tool* of governments across the developed world (Ronaghan, 2002). Similarly to other innovation drivers, there is an inherent risk in e-government implementations (Aichholzer, 2004) that is most commonly addressed in strategic planning of the initiatives.

Ronaghan (2002) identifies five stages of e-government development and implementation—the emerging, the enhanced, the interactive, the transactional, and the seamless. A United Nations study was conducted in 2001 across 190 U.N. member states to assess their progress. The results of this study are shown in Figure 1.

Emerging nations have limited e-government capacity; if it is present, it is likely to focus on mostly static Internet sites with infrequently updated information.

The majority of countries have reached the enhanced stage, with more up-to-date government information available on the Internet and

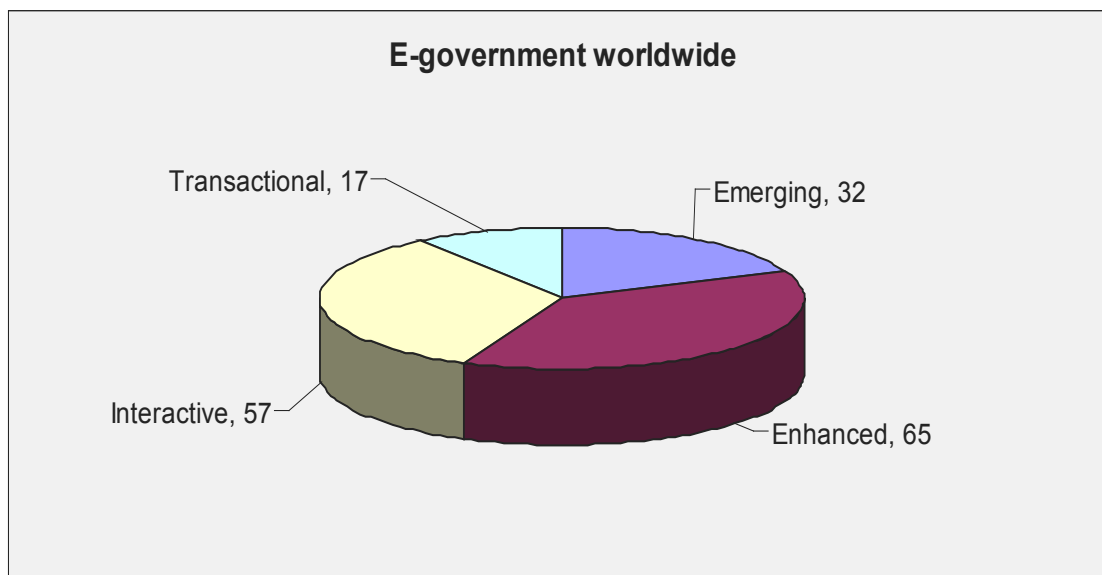
links to other diverse sites that assist some form of government service.

A slightly smaller, but similar percentage of countries are at the interactive stage. These allow a greater level of sophistication in interaction and have abilities to process forms and applications online as well as access to specialized information.

The current leaders in e-government initiatives have achieved the transactional stage, where complex transactions (such as passport and visa applications) can be processed through the Internet. Other online services range from payment of parking fines to complex taxation calculations and payments.

The UN study found no countries to yet be at the most advanced, seamless, stage of e-government adoption at which full integration of e-services across administrative boundaries becomes possible (Szeremeta, 2002). The seamless stage of e-government, amongst other services, includes the online voting system. From the time of the U.N. study this trend has continued and to date no central government has yet announced their readiness to provide complete election services via the Internet.

Figure 1. E-government stages of implementation worldwide (Source: Ronaghan, 2002)



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