Chapter I

E-Government as Collaborative Governance:
Structural, Accountability and Cultural Reform

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ABSTRACT

In discussions on e-government, terms such as "seamless" and "joined-up" are often deployed in reference to restructuring the public sector for more effective performance. There is a critical link between delivering services online in a more client-centric fashion and government organization. This critical link often involves new coordinating mechanisms (i.e., new forms of governance) that are more collaborative than before — thus, e-government becomes collaborative government — and as such, many challenges present themselves. In government, however, collaborating is both complex and contentious, as much of public management has traditionally been premised on a command and control regime, where clear structures and rules dictate the behavior of public servants. The contentious nature of collaboration is also amplified by the political nature of government activity, and the difficulties in coordinating activities horizontally across traditional organizational units: there are structural, accountability and cultural dimensions of such coordination. E-government must be built on a fluid and constantly adapting of collaborative governance systems that respond to the twin challenges of external alignment and internal integration and cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

In discussions on e-government, terms such as "seamless" and "joined-up" are often deployed in reference to the organizational restructuring of the public sector apparatus for more effective forms of service delivery — including, of course, online channels.

Thus, there is a critical link between delivering services online in a more client-centric fashion and how government organizes and reorganizes itself to fulfill such a mission. This critical link often involves new coordinating mechanisms (i.e., new forms of governance) that are more collaborative than traditional public sector regimes of decision-making and accountability. As such, it is here where e-government becomes collaborative government — and as such, many challenges present themselves.

In government, collaborating is both a complex and contentious undertaking. It is complex in the sense that much of public management has traditionally been premised on a command and control regime, where clear structures and rules dictate the behavior of public servants. As such, collaboration becomes contentious, as it typically means acting in a manner that runs counter to the formal and traditionally accepted ways of operating.

The contentious nature of collaboration is also amplified by the political nature of government activity, and the difficulties in coordinating activities "horizontally" across the organizational portfolios (usually a single, flagship department or agency) of Ministers. In many Parliamentary regimes across the OECD, for instance, it is arguably the Cabinet or its equivalent that serves as the only meaningful venue for integrative and horizontal dialogues "joining up" all of government.

For this reason, the contours of e-government become fluid and potentially very broad, implying not only changes to service delivery models but also to the culture and structure of decision-making underpinning these models and adapting them to a more volatile and interdependent environment.

The collaborative challenges faced by national governments are immense. Yet, these linkages and relationships are not necessarily new. To varying degrees, national governments have been forced to respond to the actions and agendas of other governments and other sectors. So what exactly does e-government change?

E-government denotes an important shift in the nature of governance within such a framework in three important ways:

- First, technology, and online applications in particular, create new opportunities to link together organizations across this spectrum.
- Secondly, the policy challenges confronting cities, countries, and indeed the world demand a growing level of coordination across these levels and sectors.
- Thirdly, improving performance in the public sector, in this increasingly interconnected and relational world, requires an effective alignment of government's processes with those of its potential partners, clients, suppliers and other stakeholders.

As a result, e-government requires an emphasis on collaboration as never before. From the point of view of national governments and their organizational regimes, it is the third shift noted above, a new focus on performance that, in turn, drives the need for collaboration internally.

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