

Chapter XVI

Developing an Interdisciplinary Approach to the Evaluation of E-Government Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Can we assess the results of an e-government program in terms of its capacity to provide solutions to problems of public import? While interest in the evaluation of public IT investments is growing world-wide, there is also a widespread perception of the inadequacy of the knowledge that informs concrete practices. This chapter adopts a perspective that centers mainly on conceptual arguments; it considers the evaluation as a social research field requiring interdisciplinary inputs capable of shedding light not only on the results, but also on the implementation process of the public services. The proposed interpretive key, which draws on contributions from organization theory, augments the significance of evaluation research. The reflections offered here have the goal of both providing further insights for the academic e-government community as a whole and helping to better inform public management praxis.

INTRODUCTION

E-government is not only growing in importance, but is increasingly put to debate across the world. The public sector's deployment of Information and communication technologies (ICT)—including

internet—with objectives such as efficiency, quality of services, effectiveness of the public action, accountability, and a renewing of the political agenda (OECD, 2004) has become a key component in a set of market-driven reforms initiated by many governments since the early 1980s. Now,

everyone is looking closely at the level of expectations generated by e-government (according to Lim & Tang, 2008, it ‘marks a turning point in public agencies’ use of IT’) and the significant economic resources invested (Cresswell, Burke & Pardo, 2006; EITO, 2007).

But are the arguments in favor of e-government supported by an adequate evaluation framework? On which basis can we evaluate the success of an e-government program? At present, there are no tried and trusted common criteria capable of responding to these fundamental questions. Our knowledge to inform decisions on whether the social, economic or political effects should be realistically associated with an e-government project and what action—other than the construction of electronic services—is required, is limited (Avgerou et al., 2006).

The diffusion of e-government is documented by huge quantities of data, as attested to by the governmental reports produced on an ongoing basis (Dunleavy et al., 2002). Benchmarking exercises and international country rankings that document the development of the scenario in a comparative key receives ample media attention (Janssen et al., 2004).

In Italy, the nationwide e-government drive is guided by the ten legislative objectives defined by the Minister for Innovation in 2002 (CNIPA, 2007). Each of those goals is clearly stated and, at least on the surface, enables a rigorous quantitative comparison between the stated objective and the current situation. For example, Goal One requires that all those public services flagged as priority be made available online. Each annual report published after 2002 by CNIPA (the independent authority that assists Italy’s governmental bodies with their computerization programs) maps the progress of each objective/initiative on the basis of indicators set up at the national level. In addition, some months ago the CNIPA website (www.cnipa.it) implemented a “monitoring dashboard” that enables any citizen wanting to know the up-to-date situation of the 134 e-government projects

co-financed by the Italian government Action Plan to get detailed information, also in graphic format, on programs implemented by the local administrations. Another example, again in Italy, is that of the Ministry for Health, which recently published its second study with information on the times and waiting lists for hospital admission and outpatient clinics provided by the national health service. That information was gathered from a total of 367 websites belonging to the regional administrations, healthcare agencies, hospitals and other social service structures across the country.

Are we by any chance looking at examples of e-government evaluation systems? The answer can only be no: all the examples cited are at most systems of indicators useful for formalizing the end of the project/s in question or to communicate to the outside world the results achieved to date.

An analysis of the literature reveals that the debate so far has been influenced by disciplines that address e-government from an isolated and, thus, separate standpoint. For instance, a recent contribution by Chan et al. (2008) observes how the researchers who study e-government implementation generally come from the sphere of information systems. Therefore, the result is for the most part a techno-centric view of e-government (Heeks & Bailur, 2007) or, at best, draws on partial contributions by one or other of the many disciplines that have approached the theme (e.g. economics, policy studies, law, administration, sociology). Another major research current in e-government implementation evaluation is management science, for obvious reasons, given the role played by the consultancy firms that operate in the public sector and the oversight agencies.

This chapter adopts the perspective whereby the evaluation is understood as an empirical research method based on the analysis of the processes and results of public programs, aimed at broadening the cognitive scope of the policy-makers and the administrations (Lippi, 2007; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). In evaluation

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