Chapter 31

Learning from Failure:
Braving the Multifaceted Challenges to E-Government Development

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ABSTRACT

Large-scale electronic government projects had mixed results over the past decade. A considerably large percentage of such projects effectively failed. The over-ambitious promise of e-governance positively transforming public sectors in developing nations didn't fully materialize. The actual causes of e-government failures are still to be explored in more detail to improve the understanding of the phenomenon by practitioners and scholars alike. This chapter explores the causes of e-government failures within the context of Arab states and discusses prevailing views of such failures in earlier literature. Based on a survey of senior e-government practitioners in nine Arab countries, our findings indicate that the underlying roots of failure in e-government projects in Arab countries (which we classify in nine main categories) are entwined with multifaceted social, cultural, organizational, political, economic and technological factors. We argue that, despite their many similarities, e-government initiatives in the Arab states would be better equipped for avoiding failure when a local 'fit' is established between leadership commitment, sustainable cross-government vision, appropriate planning, rational business strategy, suitable regulatory framework, practical awareness campaigns and rigorous capacity building for the public administrators and society at large. Based on our findings, we argue that replicable "best practices" in a complex and developing field of e-government rarely exist. We conclude with a proposal to nurture a culture more tolerant to risk-taking and failure in the relatively new area of e-government in the Arab states. Until a local maturity level is reached, such culture should be accompanied with home-grown e-government risk management approaches as well as effective mechanisms of knowledge management to enable extracting relevant local lessons from failed projects and partial successes.

INTRODUCTION

By the turn of the century, an ever increasing interest in electronic government was building-up globally; a digital government revolution was in the making. The advocates of this revolution were cheering e-government as the panacea; a solution to all public sector predicaments. Most Arab states joined the e-excitement euphoria that swept regional governments. The promise that electronic government (hereafter e-government) initiatives will address public administration dilemmas captured the imaginations of policy makers and attracted citizens and businesses alike. Very few years later and after massive public investments, many of the promises put forward by e-government advocates to obliterate corruption, cut red-tape, reduce government costs and deliver more participatory governance systems have cooled down (Ciborra, 2003).

Debates started and the core question was 'what went wrong?' e-Government projects failures are not limited to Arab states. They have been documented almost in every region around the globe, see for example: (Akther et al., 2005; AP, 2004; Ciborra & Navarra, 2005; Cloete, 2004; Davenport & Horton, 2004; Eynon & Dutton, 2007; Pardo & Scholl, 2002; Salem, 2007; Titah & Barki, 2006).

There is a wide agreement that e-government projects fail in high percentages worldwide. For example, an earlier estimate by UNDESA suggested that more than 60% of e-government projects in developing countries fail (UNDESA, 2003). The World Bank estimate was even more alarming. One lead information specialist at the bank put the percentage of failed e-government projects in developing countries at 85%, from which 35% are total failures (AP, 2004). There is no solid estimate on the percentage of failed e-government projects in the Arab countries, but one could safely argue that the failure ratio had followed the same trend.

Following the general trend in the information systems body of knowledge, information systems research focusing on the public sector has primarily followed a positivist approach (Pardo & Scholl, 2002). The result has arguably been unsatisfactory in explaining failure in complex social, cultural and technical environment. However, literature viewing e-government from a socio-technical perspective managed to explore these predicaments from an arguably more realistic point of view. For example, Heeks categorized success and failure in government information systems into total failures, partial failures and successes (Heeks, 2002). A total failure in e-government projects would be described as a planned initiative that never gets implemented or an implemented e-government project that is directly abandoned almost immediately after implementation. Partial failure in the same context would describe the case in which a system is successfully implemented without achieving its key objectives. Partial failure also could describe e-government projects that achieve the intended goals but also deliver considerable undesirable results with significant implications. Success of e-government projects on the other hand is widely perceived as the case where most stakeholders would achieve most of the main objectives of the project without major unwanted outcomes. Given the many stakeholders with usually conflicting interests, assessment of total or partial failure of e-government initiatives and implementations as well as their success tends to be an issue of subjectivity (OECD & DSG, 2007; Salem, 2007). e-Government barriers have also been explored from various cultural and social perspectives. For example, cultural barriers to e-government were discussed in the literature, including the common "myths" among public administrators regarding technology, which could contribute to creating actuality gaps between expectations and realities (Eynon & Dutton, 2007; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2002). The researchers categorized cultural e-government barriers into supply side and demand side barriers within Eu-

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