

Chapter 4.17

E-Government in Saudi Arabia: Between Promise and Reality

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia is in the process of transitioning to e-government. Many of the Saudi government agencies have their own web sites; however, most are ineffective. Based on the findings of this study, the Saudis should consider several reforms, chief among which include the following: Increasing the awareness of its e-government program among its employees and the public at-large; making Internet access more available across the full spectrum of society; equipping public facilities for Internet usage; developing a legal framework for secure e-transactions; adopting a flexible approach to technological change and the IT environment more generally; providing IT training to government

employees; partnering with the private sector to establish electronic fund transfers; and, finally, fostering 2-way communication between government agencies and between the government and the public.

INTRODUCTION

The private sector has made significant strides toward using electronic business, known as e-business, as a technological tool to provide services to their customers faster and better. E-business assists businesses in making faster decisions and helping to improve efficiency and productivity. Also many governments have taken

steps toward implementing electronic government, or e-government, but their progress must be considered more deliberate and slow compared with the private sector. In fact, progress varies from one government to another (even within the U.S.). Some governments such as Sweden, the United States, and Singapore have made tremendous strides forward using e-government. According to Holmes (2001), the business sector is more eager to invest in technology than the public sector since companies must compete with each other to provide better services and attract customers. However, governments do not need to attract customers, and making a right decision is more important than making a fast decision. In the private sector, a quick decision is often important to remain competitive in the market place.

In theory, e-government provides opportunities for government agencies to do their jobs better in a less costly manner. Holmes (2001) says that e-government is being led by the need for government to improve services, reduce expenditures, meet public anticipations and improve relationships with citizens, and assist with economic development. Furthermore, e-government can play a significant role in building trust between governments and citizens by providing an opportunity for them to participate in the policy process (OECD 2003). E-government can create networks of information flow among the different parts of the government to facilitate access to services, and also to transform the working environment for public employees at all levels. According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, or OECD, (2003) “[g]overnments will have to follow suite [sic] and adopt information society tools and working practices if they [want] to remain responsive to their citizens needs.”

Recently, governments in the Middle East have started using e-government as a means to achieve a high level of performance while providing cost effective outcomes. However, many of these governments are still in the beginning of that process. Saudi Arabia, the biggest country

in the middle east, is on course for a transition to e-government. Today, most of the Saudi government agencies have their own Web sites; however, most of these Web sites are inefficient in that they just provide basic and general information about the organizations and often the data are not up to date. While some of these Web sites offer better services, such as interactive services and the ability to submit a form, it is hard to find a government Web site where you can apply for a job, arrange an appointment, or renew a license.

According to Denslow (2005), there are some issues facing the adoption of e-government in the region. One of the largest challenges is the low levels of computer literacy rates and poor IT skills in the region. The United Arab Emirates hosted a conference entitled “e-government forum” that was organized by Datamatix group in May, 2005. The main goal of that conference was to address the problems and challenges facing e-government implementation in the region (Stensgaard, 2005).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There have been a number of studies that focus on the e-government experiences from several developing countries around the world. Many of these studies examine the effects, impacts, challenges, and issues of implementing e-government from the perspective of a developing nation. However, there have been relatively few studies on e-government in Saudi Arabia or the rest of the Arab world. Studies conducted by OECD (2003) provided depth examinations of several countries’ experiences with implementing e-government including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Mexico, the United States, and Germany. The studied compared and evaluated the differences of implementing e-government among these selected OECD countries. Also, they focused on the challenges and obstacles that should be overcome in order for e-governments to flourish. The results showed the most important challenges facing

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