Chapter 1.2
E–Governance

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ABSTRACT

E-governance uses Internet and communication technologies to automate governance in innovative ways, so that it becomes more efficient, more cost-effective, and empowers the human race even more. E-governance exercises are being attempted for more than a decade now, but have so far achieved only mixed success. The long-term prognosis for e-governance, however, remains extremely positive. The emergence of Web-services technologies, the continually proliferating computer networks, and the irreversible migration towards digital information strongly confirm the view that e-governance is here to stay. The eventual success of any e-governance project is intimately linked to the methodology used, and to that complex mesh between men, machines, and mindsets. We explain the "what," "why," and "how" of e-governance. We also talk of e-governance concerns, and discuss a few illustrative case studies.

WHAT IS E-GOVERNANCE?

Definitions

The biggest problem in developing countries is good governance, not poverty. It is, for example, well known that only a miniscule fraction of the money earmarked for development, relief, or rehabilitation eventually filters down to fulfill its mandated objective. There are also numerous instances where the concern is not how to *find* the money, but how to go through the maze of complicated procedures to *spend* the available money before the financial year ends.

Until a decade ago, the sheer logistics of accounting, bookkeeping, correspondence, and approvals was an onerous overhead. But the World Wide Web completely changed things. With e-mail, correspondence across the globe became almost instantaneous, and richer, because mail attachments were possible. The technologies to make Web pages interactive, and connect them

to databases, worked wonders on the approval processes: approvals became faster, were based on more intelligent inputs, and could be securely archived. It was now possible, and indeed highly desirable, to use the Web for real governance.

Electronic governance (or e-governance) could therefore be defined as the use of Internet and communication technologies to automate governance in innovative ways, so that it becomes more efficient, more cost-effective, and empowers the human race even more.

Since "governance" is normally associated with a "government," may authors choose to explicitly mention the government while defining e-governance. Backus (2001), for example, defines e-governance as the "application of electronic means in the interaction between government and citizens and government and businesses, as well as in internal government operations to simplify and improve democratic, government and business aspects of governance." The strategic objective of e-governance, as Backus explains, is simply to use electronic means to support and stimulate good governance.

Governance vs. E-Governance

Both governance and e-governance are based on the same principles, and aim to achieve the same end objective. But the means used are widely different. Consider, for example, the requirement of a publicly funded national R&D lab to recruit scientists. A decade ago, the following procedure was probably adopted: (a) advertise widely in national newspapers indicating the job requirement and eligibility, (b) identify the format in which applications must be submitted, (c) receive, sort, and classify the applications sent, (d) shortlist the applicants and invite them for a test or interview, and (e) select the candidates and issue them appointment letters.

This entire process usually took almost a year—so long that the applicants often got tired of waiting and flew away to some other opportunity.

The excuse offered for the delay was that prescribed government procedures were too complex and tedious. It was ironical that these classical governance procedures were actually sending away the best talent instead of bringing it in.

The e-governance approach would dramatically change things: the job requirement and eligibility would appear as hyperlinked Web pages on the lab's Web site. The application format would be a Web page template, with thoughtful validations to improve data quality. Upon submission, the applicant's data would instantaneously flow into database tables on the lab's server. The shortlisting process would merely involve making lists based on a wide variety of database queries and, finally, the selected candidates would be issued appointment letters via an e-mail attachment.

The advantages offered by this e-governance procedure are abundantly clear, but let us list them for the record. First, the "time-to-recruit" is dramatically reduced: 12 months could be reduced to 1-2 months. Second, the quality of the selected candidates is significantly better because of timely selection and improved data quality and search procedures. Third, the procedure is much less expensive; there are no advertisement or data tabulation costs. Fourth, the e-recruitment procedure reaches a much larger number of applicants right across the globe because of the growing ubiquity of the Web, and because the application window is open 24×7. And, finally, the e-governance procedure automatically guarantees data or content in digital form, making them more amenable for future knowledge management or data mining exercises.

On the down side, e-governance procedures frequently raise security concerns, for example, could someone access or modify information? Electronic procedures also require widespread, efficient, and reliable computer networks. But the biggest concern relates to mindsets: officials involved in governance fiercely resist change.

Table 1 summarizes the arguments for and against e-governance. It can be seen that the advantages significantly outweigh the concerns.

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