

E-Commerce Developments

The Role of E-Government in Europe's Future

“Europe’s public sector is today at a crossroads, facing challenging economic and social conditions, institutional change and the profound impact of new technologies. Expectation is growing that, as it is a major economic factor for boosting economic growth, the public sector can and will play a strong role in realizing the Lisbon strategy for economic, social and environmental renewal.” This challenge, the European Commission reiterates in a Communication to the (COM(2003)567 final), requires improving the efficiency, productivity and quality of government services.

Already today, the Commission has found “good practices in many countries show that eGovernment is a powerful means indeed to deliver better quality public services, reduce waiting times and improve cost-effectiveness, raise productivity, and improve transparency and accountability.” The Commission believes “eGovernment should have a strategic focus: the achievement of Lisbon goals, reduction of barriers to the internal market for services and mobility across Europe, effective implementation of national policies and regional or local development.”

It is recognized that “the introduction of e-Government is not easy. Providing user-centered services and cutting red tape (i.e. unnecessary administrative burden), requires that information is shared across departments and different levels of government (e.g. between the local and national level). More often than not this implies organizational change. It requires willingness to re-think established ways of working. This often leads to resistance. Moreover, eGovernment is not free. The pay-off often takes time.”

The eEurope 2005 Action Plan elaborates the responsibilities and tasks that will be required to achieve the Commission’s objectives. Following is the Executive Summary:

The objective of this Action Plan is to provide a favorable environment for private investment and for the

creation of new jobs, to boost productivity, to modernize public services, and to give everyone the opportunity to participate in the global information society. eEurope 2005 therefore aims to stimulate secure services, applications and content based on a widely available broadband infrastructure.

The Barcelona European Council called on the Commission to draw up an eEurope action plan focusing on “*the widespread availability and use of broadband networks throughout the Union by 2005 and the development of Internet protocol IPv6, and the security of networks and information, eGovernment, eLearning, eHealth and eBusiness*” (Barcelona European Council, Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 40 [<http://ue.eu.int/en/Info/eurocouncil/index.htm>])

This action plan will succeed the eEurope 2002 action plan endorsed by the Feira European Council in June 2000. eEurope is part of the Lisbon strategy to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy with improved employment and social cohesion by 2010.

eEurope 2002, with the joint effort of all stakeholders, has already delivered major changes and has increased the number of citizens and businesses connected to the Internet. It has reshaped the regulatory environment for communications networks and services and for e-commerce and opened the door to new generations of mobile and multimedia services. It is providing opportunities for people to participate in society and helping the workforce to acquire the skills needed in a knowledge-driven economy. It is bringing computers and the Internet into schools across the Union, bringing governments on-line and focusing attention on the need to ensure a safer online world.

The information society has much untapped potential to improve productivity and the quality of life. This potential is growing due to the technological developments of broadband and multi-platform access, i.e. the possibility to connect to the Internet via other means

than the PC, such as digital TV and 3G. These developments are opening up significant economic and social opportunities. New services, applications and content will create new markets and provide the means to increase productivity and hence growth and employment throughout the economy. They will also provide citizens with more convenient access to information and communication tools.

Most services are provided by the market. Developing new services needs significant investment, most of it from the private sector. But there is a problem: funding more advanced multimedia services depends on the availability of broadband for these services to run on, while funding broadband infrastructure depends on the availability of new services to use it. Action is needed to stimulate services and infrastructure to create the dynamic where one side develops from the growth of the other. Both developing services and building infrastructures are mainly tasks for the private sector and eEurope will create a favorable environment for private investment. This means not only developing an investment friendly legal framework but also taking action that stimulates demand and so reduces uncertainty to private investors.

eEurope 2005 applies a number of measures to address both sides of the equation simultaneously. On the demand side, actions on e-government, e-health, e-learning and e-business are designed to foster the development of new services. In addition to providing both better and cheaper services to citizens, public authorities can use their purchasing power to aggregate demand and provide a crucial pull for new networks. On the supply side, actions on broadband and security should advance the roll-out of infrastructure.

The Lisbon strategy is not just about productivity and growth but also about employment and social cohesion. eEurope 2005 puts users at the center. It will improve participation, open up opportunities for everyone and enhance skills. eEurope contains measures regarding e-inclusion in all action lines. One important tool to achieve this is to ensure multi-platform provision of services. It is generally accepted that not everyone will want to have a PC. Making sure that services, especially online public services, are available over different terminals such as TV sets or mobile phones is crucial to ensuring the inclusion of all citizens.

The eEurope action plan is based on two groups of actions which reinforce each other. On the one hand, it aims to stimulate services, applications and content, covering both online public services and e-business; on the other hand it addresses the underlying broadband infrastructure and security matters.

The action plan comprises four separate but inter-linked tools.

By 2005, Europe should have:

- modern online public services

- e-government
 - e-learning services
 - e-health services

- a dynamic e-business environment

and, as an enabler for these

- widespread availability of broadband access at competitive prices
- a secure information infrastructure

Firstly, policy measures to review and adapt legislation at national and European level; to ensure legislation does not unnecessarily hamper new services; to strengthen competition and interoperability; to improve access to a variety of networks; and, to demonstrate political leadership. eEurope 2005 identifies those areas where public policy can provide an added value and therefore focuses on a limited set of actions in priority areas. Some key targets are:

- Connecting public administrations, schools, health care to broadband
- Interactive public services, accessible for all, and offered on multiple platforms
- Provide online health services
- Removal of obstacles to the deployment of broadband networks
- Review of legislation affecting e-business
- Creation of a Cyber Security Task Force

Secondly, eEurope will facilitate the exchange of experience, of good practices and demonstration projects, but also of sharing the lessons from failures. Projects will be launched to accelerate the roll-out of leading edge applications and infrastructure.

Thirdly, policy measures will be monitored and better focused by benchmarking of the progress made in achieving the objectives and of the policies in support of the objectives.

Fourthly, an overall co-ordination of existing policies will bring out synergies between proposed actions. A steering group will provide a better overview of policy developments and ensure a good information exchange between national and European policy makers and the private sector. This steering group would also make an early participation of candidate countries possible.

This action plan is a proposal to Member States to take some far-reaching commitments. It is an invita-

tion to the private sector to work with the Commission and Member States to realize the eEurope objectives. It sets out the initiatives the Commission will or is willing to take. Overall the action plan sets the scene for a coordinated European policy approach on information society issues. The eEurope action plan should be confirmed as a key element in the Lisbon strategy. If

successful, this plan will have a significant impact on growth and productivity, employment and social cohesion in Europe.

The European Council in Sevilla is expected to endorse an Action Plan and invite Council and Parliament to adopt as quickly as possible the necessary legal and budgetary instruments to implement it.