Information Polity 7 (2002) 163–166
IOS Press

Review

Government on the Web II, National Audit Office, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 764 Session 2001–2002, 25 April 2002, available at www.nao.gov.uk and www.governmentontheweb.org

In recent years, e-Government has become an important topic in the public sector. All over the world, policy makers, politicians, public managers, consultants, scientists, and now even auditors are pursuing this theme, focusing upon heterogeneous public sector organisations in various policy domains and at different administrative levels. This broad spectrum of interest in e-Government leads us to question what "e-Government" is actually perceived as in the current climate. Some critics posit that e-Government for many public sector organisations today is "only" to have a Web site [1]. Others, however, stress the transformational character of designing and implementing e-Government initiatives, not only at the front-office of public organisations but particularly also in the back-office (idem). According to the latter, both public sector internal and external relationships are changed through use of the Internet, and more broadly, combined ICT-enabled operations. e-Government is therefore not an exclusive issue for public sector officials, but also an important theme to develop together with the "customers" of e-Government, for example citizens, companies, and other public sector organisations.

So far, however, there have not been many comprehensive research projects undertaken in relation to the relatively new phenomenon of e-Government. In addition, very few national audit offices have published in-depth evaluation studies on e-Government developments in their countries. This study of Government on the Web II is, in many ways, exceptional due to the fact that the UK National Audit Office had approached an academic team from the London School of Economics and Political Science and the University College London to undertake the study. This collection of both national and international data has resulted in a highly informative and accessible report, suitable for all kinds of readers. It offers a rich, comprehensive picture of developments of e-Government processes in the UK over the last few years. Consistent with its central topic, the report is available for free and can be downloaded from either the National Audit Office Web site (www.nao.gov.uk), or the academic team's dedicated Web site (www.governmentontheweb.org). The latter also contains relevant information in relation to the censuses undertaken in this study of all central and local government Web sites in England, related reports, related academic papers/conference presentations, useful links, and background information on the research team.

"Government on the Web II" is the second evaluation study towards e-Government developments in the UK which has been carried out by the same academic team under the auspices of the National Audit Office. Published in December 1999, the first study aimed to establish a baseline for monitoring the future progress of government on the Web. The current study specifically focuses on how government organisations in the UK have changed the way in which they plan and provide Internet-based services and interactions. In order to construct an overall picture of progress since the 1999 report, the research team utilised a set of different methods. Besides the already mentioned censuses of all central government and local authority Web sites in England, two in-depth case studies of major UK government departments were undertaken – more specifically, a business-facing agency (HM Customs and Excise), and a citizen-facing agency, (the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions) which, amongst other things, is responsible for promoting e-Government to local authorities in England. The research team

has also undertaken and employed an analysis of central policy initiatives and procedures maintained by the Office of the electronic Envoy; an analysis of UK government departments' Web traffic; and an analysis of e-Government policies in several comparable countries (i.e. the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the Netherlands).

To a non-UK citizen it is amazing to see a national audit office having invited academe to fully – and even regularly – carry out a national policy evaluation study. In terms of carrying out research the responsible academic team certainly has done a tremendous job, which will be useful to many more parties interested in e-Government developments in the UK than public sector officials only. Somewhat unclear, however, in this report remain the evaluation criteria against which progress in e-Government since 1999 is actually measured. For instance, compared to the 1999 report, different research methods and objects were chosen to reconstruct changes involved in e-Government processes. As a result, the current study turns out to be not so much an assessment of actual progress since 1999, but more of an exploration of the kind of progress made: put differently, what kind of changes and change issues have appeared in e-Government policy and practice of UK government agencies during the evaluation period. The argument put forward by the research team to explain the examination of two new case study departments compared to the 1999 report, namely to broaden the coverage of problem areas encountered by citizen-facing and by business-facing government departments (p.67), seems to confirm this point of view.

Consequently, it seems to be difficult actually to evaluate current e-Government practices in the UK compared to the situation found in 1999 and therefore to use the first evaluation study as baseline for monitoring the progress of government on the web in the year 2001. The question here is whether this evaluation difficulty is a real problem. In my opinion, it is not, as even in this short period of time, the context of e-Government has changed so much that it might be comparing apples to oranges. The research team itself also seems to have acknowledged this evaluation difficulty, starting their report with an overview of changes in the social and policy context of Internet-based services and interactions in the UK since 1999. For instance, key facts were presented about Internet and Web use in the UK by late 2001, showing a continuing, fast rise in Internet penetration figures in the UK: from about 15 per cent of the British people having access to the Internet at home, at work or via a university in late 1998; one in five British households having Internet access by mid 1999; to 45 per cent of all British households with access to the Internet by January 2002. Additionally, by autumn 2001, 13 per cent of British (adult) consumers had established Internet bank accounts and 3 per cent of British consumers even spent more than £ 500 over 3 months on purchases online. Of large businesses in the UK, 54 per cent made transactions online by October 2001, compared to 31 per cent of small businesses. Another important social development after 1999 was the end of the dot.com boom. Consequently, likely effects on private and public sector organisations with regard to Web based service developments were briefly discussed in this part of the study.

Besides the introduction and expansion of the Office of the Electronic Envoy within the Cabinet Office, a major policy change in the UK since 1999 concerns the fact that the 100 per cent target for services to be available electronically has been brought forward from 2008 to 2005. This adjustment in central e-Government policy has been used by the research team as an important point of departure for the current evaluation study to consider progress made. Other important starting points for this study have in general been the 19 recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee on the first Government on the Web report presented in June 2000, essentially calling for an improved target regime linked to departments' service delivery agreements and annual plans; better central monitoring of how far targets were being met; and improved staff training and performance in implementing Web sites by government departments and agencies.

In general, the research team found strong progress in central policy efforts to promote e-Government across UK central and local government by providing a clear cultural lead from the centre and committing significant dedicated resources in terms of both staff (244) and money (£ 52 million annual expenditure). In addition, the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions has substantial funding (£ 350 million) available over a three year period (2001–2004) to encourage local authorities to develop their Internet presence, to make services available online and to meet the UK central government's recently adjusted, wider definition of "electronic" provision, including telephone call centres or one-stop shops where these are backed by IT support. Also, substantial evidence of progress was observed in the central delivery of joined-up initiatives, such as the Government Gateway project and the recently established UK Online central portal. However, concerning responsibilities of both the Office of the electronic Envoy, HM Customs and Excise, and the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions for official Web sites, weaknesses were generally perceived in the availability of reliable, systematic data on the existence, state of development, quality, and level of use of government Web sites. Moreover, also to be able to monitor progress up to the 2005 target, meaningful performance indicators based on measuring actual Web usage and the take-up of electronic services were perceived to be lacking. Furthermore, the development of a methodology for measuring the costs and benefits of e-Government provision was judged to lag behind.

To respond to the observed weaknesses, the research team suggested that, amongst other things, public agencies should use the presented censuses of central agencies' and local authorities' Web sites within this study as helpful checklists of Web site features that are currently feasible. For instance, agencies might use these checklists as benchmarks to review how they are currently performing. In the census of local Web sites (in November 2001, 97 per cent of local authorities in England had a Web site) the research team found the average local authority in England to be delivering just over a quarter of the basic features, with county councils as the best performing group. Additionally, it observed that some transactional features at local Web sites were spreading. The census of all central government Web sites (in November 2001, where 82 per cent of UK central government agencies had a Web site, compared to 60 per cent in December 1999) also showed some area of considerable progress on basic features since 1999, with a few transactional features developing, but only limited progress on more sophisticated electronic publishing or interactive features. Compared to the alternative e-Government development model preferred in this study, which supports the idea that different kinds of government agencies can make progress in e-Government in various ways instead of following an established process with five stages in increasing order of implementation difficulty, an additional conclusion of this study is that departments and agencies in the UK are generally past the first development stage of having a basic site but still far away from the final stage of holistic electronic governance. However, this does not imply that the stage of holistic electronic governance is and will be an ideal type for Web sites of UK departments and agencies. According to the research team, being much more visible to citizens compared to sites of central agencies, the longer term potential for local authority sites in particular is to provide key windows into the whole public sector. At this time however, concerning the various possible pathways between the beginning and end point of e-Government development, the research team advocates that all public agencies pursue a balanced approach to developing electronic publishing and more interactive Web site features, alongside emerging transactional features, to be able to offer a better performance to e-Government customers. In addition, all government sector agencies would need to have in place appropriate management information to monitor usage of their Web sites and electronic services regularly, and to "play back" this information to the content providers and divisions responsible for originating Web materials and Internet services.

What the research team effectively has emphasized with this comprehensive report, is that e-Government to UK departments and agencies has to be – and in many cases already is – more than only to have a Web site. The management of take-up and usage of various Web site features need to have the central attention of UK central and local government, not only for them to be able to reach a central policy target in 2005, but also particularly to serve the customers of e-Government, who more and more will be accustomed to have Internet access and might currently wonder why government is not able to offer electronic services like he or she is used to in dealing with the private sector. It is a pity that the reader cannot find much in this report about the research results in the various comparative countries, nor in the background materials at the accompanying Web site. If this material is as rich and comprehensive as the UK study, it really is a loss to all kinds of "customers" of e-Government studies.

Reference

[1] H.P.M. van Duivenboden and A.M.B. Lips eds, *Klantgericht werken in de publieke sector*, Inrichting van de elektronische overheid, Lemma, Utrecht, 2001.

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July 2002