

Book Review

Handbook of Research on ICT-Enabled Transformational Government: A Global Perspective, edited by Vishanth Weerakkody (Brunel University, UK), Marijn Janssen (Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands) and Yogesh K. Dwivedi (Swansea University, UK), Information Science Reference, 2009, 586 pages.

Electronic Government (or e-government) is expected to be efficient, citizen-centric and service-friendly at the same time. These expectations from the public put governments under enormous pressures to transform their practices. However, simply overlaying Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) onto existing governmental structures and processes fails to realise desired outcomes in terms of delivering efficient and effective public services. Consequently, transformational government is viewed as a next stage of e-government. This stage emphasises doing things differently instead of realising large changes in public sector practices and structures that cannot be easily undone. Nowadays, this field is rapidly growing and gets increasing attention from both government agency practitioners and scholars in many academic disciplines. The “Handbook of Research on ICT-Enabled Transformational Government: A Global Perspective” aims to provide an understanding and highlight some of the key challenges, issues and complexities involved in transformational government. It is the first comprehensive book dedicated to the discussion of transformational government targeting both academia and practitioners. This book provides a timely contribution to the field of transformational government by including many aspects and views on transformation, including showcasing successful practices from all over the world.

In the preface of the book, the editors discuss the emergence of transformational government by identifying the degree of transformation and the underlying societal factors. Having evolved from e-government but encapsulating a wider perspective of the transformational aspects, transformational government has been defined by the editors as “*the ICT-enabled and organisation-led transformation of government operations, internal and external processes, structures and culture to enable the realisation of citizen-centric services that are transparent, cost effective and efficient*”. This definition builds the foundation for the scope of this book allocated over five sections. Taking Section I as an example, there are five chapters respectively focusing on the need for changing institutions, business processes, concentrated operations (shared services), citizens’ roles and the factors influencing service quality. They all relate to one or more aspects mentioned in the definition. Therefore, this definition strongly steers the editing of the book.

Overall, the five sections and 25 chapters provide an overview of the various aspects of transformational government. Take a survey of all the five sections and despite some inconsistency between chapters, the line of discussion through those sections turns out to be quite clear, due to a discussion of foundations in the first section. This section is followed by an overview of the various technology aspects (interoperability, processes optimization, applications integration and standards), complemented by a section on how to support managers in achieving transformation. In the next part measuring and the evaluation of transformational government efforts is tackled, followed by a section dealing with user adoption and acceptance. The first section discusses the fundamental aspects of transforming governments’ business processes and practices. This section will be quite interesting for scholars in different academic disciplines, including the social sciences, business process management and public administration. In Section II, interoperability is viewed as a sine qua non for transformational government.

Interoperability is necessary as transformational government is aimed at ensuring that formerly fragmented and distributed organizations or departments operate in a coherent and consistent manner. Scholars from the Information Systems discipline as well as technical practitioners, such as IT architects, will find this section interesting. The first and second section can be regarded as the discussion of strategies and technology support for transformational government, whilst the third section is about the knowledge and management support. Researchers in business management, knowledge management and practitioners responsible for disaster management and policy making will enjoy reading this section. The next section will be very attractive to scholars from various disciplines as well as innovators in governments, as measurement and evaluation is another requisite in both academic research and innovation practice. The last section contains the discussion of factors influencing the adoption and acceptance of transformation. This is realised using two elaborated research studies as the complement to the transformational government context. Both social scientists and strategy makers in government agencies are the intended readers of this section.

The 25 chapters in this book include contributions from academics, practitioners and policy makers to provide a balanced perspective of the strategic, organizational, technical and socio-cultural as well as theoretical and practical issues that have shaped the progress of electronic government and transformational government. In this sense, indeed as a mix of theory and practice, this book can be useful for academia (research and teaching) as well as practice (policy makers and implementers). The other side of the coin is that the diffusion of topics diminishes the focus of the book. The book provides a good overview, but results in a shallower treatment of each topic raised. For such a complex and interdisciplinary field, a single book is hardly able to meet simultaneously both an extensive scope and depth. By using the word 'handbook' in its title, a clear-cut preference between scope and depth is expressed. It does a good job in collecting the state-of-art research from leading scholars coming from different disciplines and backgrounds. Besides academic researchers and practitioners, this book is suitable for students who would like to get a comprehensive overview of the most important concepts, trends and technologies involved in transformational government implementations.

Within all five sections, three of them have one chapter that takes quite a broad stance towards the topic of the section. In Chapter I (Section I), Homburg introduces a social shaping of technology perspective on public sector transformation initiatives. That is how the specific institutions (values, norms, informal rules and taken for granted beliefs) impact and interact with ICT. This reflects the broad scope of this book and, of course, the issue of Section I, the foundations of transformational government. In Chapter X (Section II), the essential of interoperability and its constituents in the context of public sector are discussed. This chapter puts a substantial effort into figuring out a clear definition of interoperability by analyzing various definitions. At the same time, it identifies the constitutions of interoperability in e-government systems by analysis of a few national/regional interoperability frameworks. In terms of measuring and evaluating for improvement of transformational government (Section IV), Chapter XVI indicates that evaluation, as a social research field, requires interdisciplinary inputs not only on the results, but also on the implementation process of the public services. From an epistemological standpoint, the discussion concludes that evaluation, by nature, is "oriented to the construction of an opinion on the setting". That is relied on "a toolbox (conceptual, theoretical, methodological, technical) to ascertain data in hand". This discussion is very much on the root of evaluation. If the chapters mentioned above can be emphasised, e.g. being positioned as the first chapter in its section, it would result in the reader having a more fundamental understanding of the issue in the section before starting to read the rest of the chapters.

Chapters XI and XIV focus on knowledge issues: how to link organizational knowledge to practice, how to enhance organizational capabilities to respond to its external environment, and how to use knowledge

management to achieve the competence to provide high quality services. At the same time, Chapters XII, XIII and XV focus on management perspectives, such as project management, crises management and governance in the knowledge economy. The bridge between “knowledge” and “management” described as “knowledge management” is not clear in this section. Knowledge management can be regarded narrowly as activities to identify, create, represent, and distribute knowledge in organizations. Some discussions in this section are already broader than the narrow, but quite common, understanding of knowledge management. For example, Chapter XIII mentions disaster management and Chapter XV involves a discussion of the knowledge economy. Separating chapters into two parts according to the title of the section is not working in Section V due to the diversity of topics in it. The first three chapters of this section focus respectively on the adoption and acceptance of different issues (open source software, electronic services, and electronic files) while the remaining two chapters present research on e-government in different countries (Armenia and Tanzania). Maybe the editors’ intention was to extend the stage of discussion, and indeed it works, but this has the disadvantage that the consistency between the chapters is lost in these two sections.

High expectations from citizens and businesses put governments under enormous pressures to transform their practices. This book fills in the knowledge gap by offering a diverse collection of chapters and covering theories, concepts, methods, frameworks, guidelines, evaluations and challenges in transformational government research. The quality of the individual chapters is very good and the editors are successful in incorporating a wide variety of ICT-related subjects in one volume. The broad coverage of issues and the high quality of articles make the book a good reference source and a valuable collection for transformational government research and facilitating discussion between researchers and practitioners.

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