

Administration in the digital age

If we have to improve the administration of governments anywhere, we would have to do some serious introspection, do a system analysis and figure out where the rub lies.



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Everyday, when I see many faceless citizens approaching me for many of our acts and non-acts, I can't help asking myself a question whether it is possible for me to live up to their expectations. The expectations that are huge while the resources I have at my disposal are thin. To make matters worse, the systems to administer these resources are primitive and inefficient. Nonetheless, I would also be unsure as to how many of them are in a position to approach me and how many would feel positively about the prospects of their case if they could do so.

I know my own constraints; sometimes I have lack of resources while sometimes the manpower, sometimes there are vested interests not allowing it to be done in a particular way while on few occasions the general lethargy and casualness that has crept into our system is the major impediment.

The vast apparatus of governance that we have, has come to a state where it does not move without getting a push. The unfortunate thing is that many of us don't have the capacity or the wherewithal to give that push. The systems of governance are controlled by the powerful and influential; this needs to be transformed to serve the requirements of all, whoever they may be.

This rhetoric might sound a bit clichéd, after all there are so many who have been talking of this. What remains unaddressed however, is that many of these issues have been getting swept below the carpet without any visible change. Nobody is able to tell us where the real action and the solution is. One thing is certain; the solution does not lie in the talk and cannot be in pronouncements. If we have to improve the administration of governments anywhere, we would have to do some seri-

ous introspection, do a system analysis and figure out where the rub lies.

Every government department has two lives. One that it lives internally and the other that it lives with its clients, the citizens. Internally, the organizations suffer from problems of malfunctioning due to lack of proper and smooth systems while externally it makes its clients suffer. There are many in the government who are extremely overworked while there are many more who are woefully underworked or do not want to work. Due to this, it is very difficult to distinguish where the disease is and who the diseased is.

A thorough system analysis would however confirm that nine out of ten times, both the prevention and cure of this disease is possible only if we allow technology to take precedence over the norm. Internally, technology solutions would ensure that the non-performers can't hide themselves and the decision support systems are on a stronger wicket with properly processed information base. Externally, technology would ensure that the discretionary advantages and favors possible in the tech-less system are eliminated allowing level playing field to everybody, which in the essence, is the purpose of governments.

This however does not mean that technology by itself can make governments transparent, smart and responsive as there are host of other factors that influence governance. But, it is also true that technology is a sine qua non, an indispensable condition for achieving that.

To any casual observer, a government office is a place where papers move or get stalled, affecting people. This information moves through a huge hierarchy, giving scope to maneuverability at all levels. This leads to imperfections in its processing

Saukaryam

Visakhapatnam, AP, India

'SAUKARYAM'(meaning facility) was launched in Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation.

Under this project, a Metro Area Network (MAN) encompassing 120 Sq.Kms has been created through broadband/leased circuits. A large number of banks for accepting municipal payments and various Municipal Offices have been connected to each other. A LAN encompassing all wings of the Municipal Corporation forms the backbone to the MAN. Being web enabled, it provides access to citizens through a utility driven web site for multiple services. For citizens without access to the Internet or computers, fully computerized City Civic Centres on the network have been created, that deliver identical services.

The project covers the whole gamut of civic services ranging from the facility of online payment of dues to allowing lodging of grievances online or filing building plan applications and getting their status without running from pillar to post. There also

is a facility for the hospitals to send Birth and Death information online helping citizens get their certificates instantly. As the Municipal Corporation enters into the daily lives of the citizens in many ways, all such multifarious areas have been covered. Now at the click of a button, citizens can see the garbage movement performance, water supply plan of their street and also the updated infrastructure works being executed in their city. It also provides the contractors online tender notices, entrepreneurs and philanthropists business opportunities and social possibilities the town entails. It has an online forum for the citizens to vent their grievances, air their opinions and stimulate necessary social change. In short, every service extended by City Corporation is being extended online under this project.

The prime motto of the project has been to improve the interface of the citizens with other government departments, as well as, to give them an integrated payment gateway. Simplifying the whole process, the project conceptualized an innovative approach. It opened a multi



utility center on the metro area network. Calling, 'Bill Junction', has been self explanatory to the citizens. The process creates an online window to the citizens to pay all their utility bills under one roof. This offers a multi pronged advantage of being the ultimate payment solution.

The conceptualization of project began in September 2000 and was dedicated to the citizens for implementation by January 2001. Like most of the IT projects, the Project has been evolving since then, adding additional services and features, day by day. Offering the citizens all the Civic Services, through a user friendly, transparent and accountable method, is the USP of this Project.

e-Seva

West Godavari District, AP, India

The Project e-seva of the West Godavari district is an effort to bring government close to the people. Rather, it makes government possible *by* the people. It is an effort to deliver G2C and C2G services to rural citizens. The project opens web enabled kiosks termed e-Seva kendrams at the mandal level. The e-Seva kendrams are networked on a district level through dial up circuits and interact with the district server acting as a remote access server. To save on networking costs, the project has developed a unique synchronization tool allowing the kiosks to work

offline; Databases can be periodically synchronized in minimal time. This has huge potential for replication elsewhere and is the project's USP.

The e-Seva Kendram runs a district portal providing citizen centric services ranging from the issuance of various certificates to getting information about programmes. It also networks citizens to one other, allowing the flexibility and convenience of mutually beneficial transactions.

The horizontal portal is eventually put on the Internet, allowing vertical integration with the global information bank. As the project allows access to hitherto marginalized communities it helps bridge information gaps and is a step towards digital unite. One unique thing about this experiment is that all these kendrams are run by women self help groups, a movement that has been

gaining grounds since inception of the project in this district. The project provides information leadership to these groups and helps them act as change agents, making it possible for them to grow with the project. As a result, the self help groups draw strength from the project and buttress the project with their existing strengths, a win-win situation for the twosome.



leading to bad decisions that range from being whimsical to looking prejudiced. The bureaucratic system that was based on the impersonal arrangements is now caught in the web of its procedures. The same procedures that were created to protect it from its ill-wishers are seriously hampering the lives of its well-wishers.

So, where do we go from here? To my mind, the immediate need of the hour is to make the administration citizen centered and make use of technology for storing, retrieving, processing, handling and doling out information. However, to do this every office needs to do some ground work, carry out the system analysis to weed out the incorrect procedures, lengthy formalities and above all, right sizing so as to get right people for right positions by training and re-staffing, if required. The quality of people manning various positions needs a real push if we have to make any headway in improving the face of the government.

Unfortunately, information technology in the administrative parlance has been simply equated to computerization resulting in myriads of computers with absolutely no accent on the information part of IT. Anybody, who understands information technology would agree that IT is almost 80% in the information part and rest in the latter. The misinterpretation of this definition in government has resulted in needless addition of computers leading to a system which is neither citizen focussed nor having any real understanding of its maladies. Most of the computers lying with various organizations are relegated to being used as typewriters; more than 90% of their processing and storing capacities are unutilized.

It is well said that most complex problems have simple solutions and you only require an eye to find them. In most the cases, if every government department can take a lead, analyze its functioning, simple local IT solutions keeping citizens as focus can be found. Many such decentral-

ized local initiatives are exemplars in this regard. The need of the hour is to build on the successes of these initiatives and replicate them everywhere without reinventing the wheel. A strong political and administrative will can achieve this in fairly minimal time.

Due to the scale of operation and multiplicity of tasks what one needs in government system is creation and maintenance of databases that allows the retrieval and sorting of data easier and faster. Smooth front ends, that can allow user friendly access to these databases is the next step. Another issue is networking and connectivity wherein making all these related computers and databases talk to each other, share the information and live symbiotically. A stand alone computer serves no purpose and is an injustice to its inherent capacity. These computers, talking subconsciously without any human intervention are the key to administrative reforms. It is also important that once the databases are readied and set, any further transaction be compulsorily routed through the database so that the database is routinely and sub-consciously updated and remains relevant and dynamic at all times. The bane of most of the government databases is that it is driven by individuals rather than systems and hence, most of it is never updated once the individual departs. It is, therefore, essential that this process is

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ingrained into the departmental bloodstream and the transactions are invariably done through the database and updated without any conscious effort.

The possibilities of having common databases for multiple departments needs serious attention and require promotion. The centralized maintenance of databases at various strategic levels emerges out of this principle. Throwing open these databases into the public domain is the next logical step to complete the cycle. Such an exercise not just helps in 'citizen centering' the whole process but also enables purification and weeding out of incorrect data.

There exists a widely prevalent myth that the Information Technology solution is anti-poor and is an unaffordable luxury



Kiosks – Serving people

to nations like India. Information technology is only a tool that influences the objective and if the objective is to make the system more transparent, open and accountable, there is no way it can be anti poor. Most rural areas suffer due to the lack of accurate information on markets, products, agriculture, health, weather and education. If this can be addressed through connectivity and information technology, a sea change can be brought in the conditions of rural communities. This is why creation of a knowledge and information economy can create opportunities and thereby prosperity to impoverished areas. All the villages can become knowledge hubs and gain symbiotically from each other and derive benefits from the global

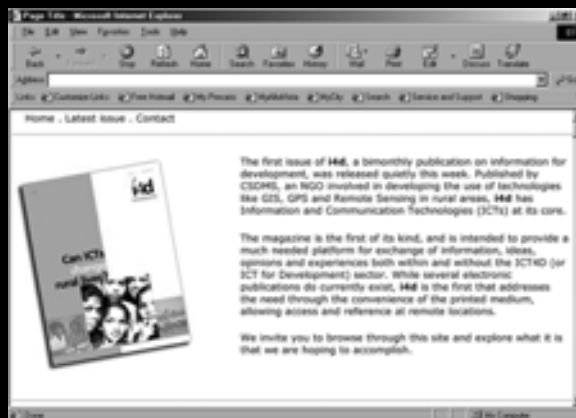
networks as in the e-seva projects.

Another area where information technology can improve things is in the delivery of civic services. These services range from bill payments, certifications and grievance redressal to citizen forums that can push the representative democracy towards becoming a popular democracy. It can not be denied that the interface between the governments and the citizens that presents a relationship of a benefactor - beneficiary has to be transformed to a principal-client one. Technology can act as a strong catalyst in this regard. Information Technology entails connectivity and networking thereby making the delivery of services offered by governments become better

and while talking of governments, local self-governments deserve maximum attention as they are at the cutting edge and immensely affect the daily lives of the citizens. It was in this context that project Saukaryam came to life.

To say the least, if we fail to act now, the Information Gap risks may widen into an unbridgeable gulf that may increase global inequality and leave the poor further behind. But if we approach the matter with the same kind of urgency and application as the commercial "dot-com" sector, then we have every chance of building a strong, new wired future that not only includes the world's poor but gives them an unprecedented opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty. ■

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