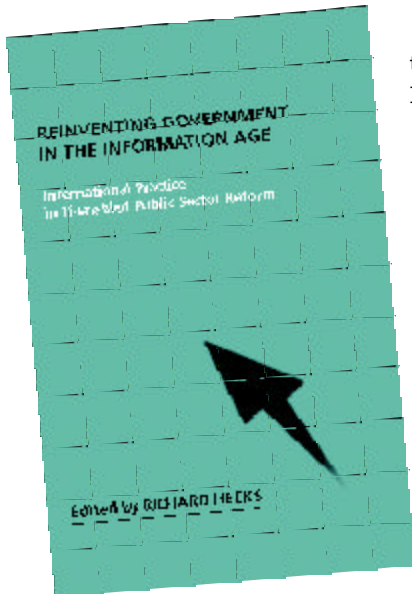


Reinventing Government in the Information Age: International Practice in IT-enabled Public Sector Reform

– Edited by Richard Heeks
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386 pages



E-government seems to be rapidly becoming the buzzword of the decade like e-commerce in the preceding years. An estimated US\$ 500 billion a year worldwide is spent on IT-based information systems in the public sector.

But here too, there is a danger that excessive hype may drown out some of the more sobering realities in implementing Internet-enabled government reform – after all, there is much

more to e-government than Web sites and email addresses.

"Reinventing Government in the Information Age" is an informative collection of cases studies, analysis and recommendations for implementing IT-enabled reform in governance practices.

The material is detailed and well-edited, and covers 17 chapters written by 19 contributors. International case studies are drawn from the Asia Pacific, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

Richard Heeks is a senior lecturer in information systems at the University of Manchester, UK. He is also the author of the book "India's Software Industry" (based on his PhD on IT policy).

Referenced works include books like *New Community Networks* (D. Schuler), *Government in the Digital Age* (P. Gosling), *Government in the Information Age* (C. Bellamy and J. Taylor), *Knowledge Societies: IT for Sustainable Development* (R. Mansell and U. Wehn), *IT, Development and Policy* (I. Horejs), *Converging Technologies and Changing Realities* (H. Hudson), *The Information Edge* (M. Wilson), and *Beyond BPR in Public Administration* (J. Taylor, I. Snellen, A. Zuurmond). Relevant journals include *Government Computing*, *Public Administration*, *Information Infrastructure and Policy*, *Management Information Systems*, *Information Technology for Development*, *World Development*, and *Electronic Government International*. Numerous online resources are also listed (www.govtech.net, www.fcw.com, www.kable.co.uk, www.citu.gov.uk, www.neda.gov.ph, www.ieg.ikm.com).

While catchy slogans revolving around 're-inventing government' and 'post-bureaucratic organisation' have been around for about three decades, IT and the Internet are being regarded today as the engine of choice for organizational reinvention.

Theoretically, benefits of IT in government can lead to improved

efficiency, decentralization, performance/resource management, marketisation, accountability, and democratization. Archival of government information over the decades is also enhanced by digital storage and classification techniques.

One of the most widespread and easiest applications in e-government is online dissemination of basic government information. E-mail feedback services for citizen queries are the next logical step, followed by interactive services (such as online parking permit forms and water bill payment in Maryland) and online community forums (in Sweden and Netherlands).

"Internet-enabled applications have much to offer information age reform processes of decentralization, increased accountability, and democratization in government. They have a capacity to improve democratic processes by providing information to citizens and by allowing the voices of citizens to be heard by each other and by politicians and public servants," according to Agneta Ranerup, lecturer in the department of informatics at the University of Goteborg in Sweden.

In Sweden, the DALI project (Delivery and Access to Local Information and Services - <http://dali.goteborg.se>) is part of a European Commission programme for government telematics in Barcelona, Bologna, Goteborg, Koln, London and Torino. It includes kiosks for disseminating civil services information, event updates, archival services, and online debates. There were some obstacles, however, in coordination of Web page design and maintenance across multiple agencies, and censorship of political debates.

Other notable examples include electronic filing of government forms from Web sites in Kansas, online procurement by government research labs in California, school funding activity in the U.K., computerized data gathering in Ghana, office decentralization in Ireland, Web-based local government services in Sweden, employment information kiosks in Spain, Portugal's Infocid project for electronic delivery of information to citizens, land resource management in Malaysia, and the LEAP initiative in Andhra Pradesh. While successes of online government have been well documented, there is also evidence that implementation failures can predominate – especially when the government models are inspired only by rationality (and not cultural/political issues), drawn from private sector examples, and adapted from different country contexts.

At a time when dozens of governments are passing national IT bills, care should be taken to address gaps which can arise in stakeholder objectives, skill levels, economic self-sustainability, employee support, political will, information security, citizen privacy, and project financing. Proper training, performance and work environment incentives should be given to encourage employees to embrace new information sharing processes supported by IT.

The authors also caution against searching for 'quick fixes' and 'silver bullets' via IT, or of too much idolization of IT approaches and paying 'lip service' to hi-tech at the cost of basic organizational attitudes and process integration.

Much e-Government reform seems to focus on IT, when the emphasis should actually also include human skill components and organizational processes – or comprehensive IS (information systems). Government planners should not take their eyes off the 'information

ball' and not be distracted by the glamour, photo-opportunities, savvy imagery and 'gee-whizzery' of IT.

Attention must be paid to data quality and format standardisation right from the onset, otherwise a move from paper-based to electronic records can create significant audit and legal problems in providing documentary evidence in the prosecution of fraud and other cases. And at times of unrest like civil war, it may be difficult to collect accurate public records, a fact of life in many emerging economies.

Having an 'IT champion' may be good for launching some government IT projects - but runs the risk of losing momentum if that official is transferred elsewhere.

"Technology upgrades and innovations may take up almost all of the organisation's change capacity, leaving hardly any for changes along other dimensions," says Heeks. From the minicomputers of the 1970s and PCs of the 1980s to LANs and the Web in the 1990s, many government agencies seem to be reeling from these waves of tech innovation and have not dealt adequately with other areas of information and IS. Improperly planned computerization of government departmental processes can actually make it harder and not easier to achieve cross-boundary reforms further down the road.

Examples of such failure symptoms abound. For instance, a recent payroll computerization in Canada failed because it was an isolated and not integrated initiative - at a cost of around US\$30 million. Computers in many government offices in India and China have become 'executive paperweights' rather than managerial tools. A public sector IT project in Barbados failed to take off because the British consultants involved did not adequately factor local realities in business and legal environments.

Computerisation of government in Russia is going through a rough patch due to inaccurate gathering of statistics, under-reporting, data-mishandling, a massive black market, and demotivated state officials. And even the biggest spender of all, the U.S. government, has problems measuring performance and accounting for meaningful returns on IT investments.

Numerous community telecentre projects have been launched in South Africa, combining library facilities and email access with training and documentation services - but the hardest stage is to find ways of sustaining these centres after initial community and donor interest wanes. More billable services need to be devised here for local business support, argues Peter Benjamin of the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa.

In terms of political processes, IT and the Net can assist not just in e-enabling government department processes, but also creating

'electronic townhalls' via online polling, Internet referendums, coverage of government meetings, public participation via televoting, and e-transformation of civil society. But there are also challenges in ensuring that productive discussion does not get drowned by 'online noise' and derailed by hate speech.

In terms of the contrasts between direct democracy and representative democracy, electronic democracy can even bring back some of the interactivity and immediacy that was lost when democracies evolved from the oral tradition of smaller city-states like Athens to today's giant mass-mediated nation-states.

In sum, the book argues that IT in government can impact existing processes in three ways: supplant (automate clerical functions), support (enable decision-making), and innovate (create new value, new methods of public service delivery, and a knowledge culture).

Managerial impacts of IT-enabled reform range from improved efficiency and incremental effectiveness to radical effectiveness and total transformation. In other words, the impact is not just on data structures and work processes but customer interaction and generation of entirely new services.

It is key to spread 'information sensitisation' and breed 'hybrid managers' spanning managerial, IT and IS skills that Information Age government requires. Social skills, understanding of knowledge formation, organisational computing practices, multidisciplinary skills, and continual learning abilities are as important as technology skills for e-government.

"Performance must be defined and tracked continuously. An organizational understanding of the value of measurement must be inculcated," advises Kim Vilborg Andersen, professor at the Copenhagen Business School.

The "five Es" of performance assessment should be effectiveness, efficacy, efficiency, ethics, and elegance. Complications can arise here due to the multi-dimensional and inter-dependent nature of public sector organizational performance.

The book provides a useful taxonomy for analyzing IS-driven successes and failures, based on an 'onion ring' model of core information, technology, information systems, organizational structure/politics/management, and socio-cultural environment. Well-planned and executed e-government services will not merely facilitate existing government processes, but may themselves shape the government. ■



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