Breaking Barriers to eGovernment

Overcoming obstacles to improving European public services

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Learning from Experience in eGovernment:
Why Projects Fail and Why They Succeed
Third workshop report

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1. Introduction

The project, Breaking Barriers to eGovernment: overcoming obstacles to improving European public services, held its third workshop on the 26th June 2006 at the Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, UK.

The workshop provided the opportunity for the project to gain from the expertise of a number of external academics and practitioners, and to share some preliminary findings. The discussion sessions following each presentation were most helpful in clarifying concepts, methodologies, and pitfalls. In total, 23 people attended the event from academia, industry and government from Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK. The sessions were as follows:

1) Welcome, Introductions and Overview
   a) “A workshop for Breaking Barriers to eGovernment”, Professor Bill Dutton, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK
   b) “Trends in European Government”, Dr Trond-Arne Undheim, eGovernment Unit, European Commission

2) “myGovernment.com: government the way you want it”, Jerry Fishenden, Microsoft UK.

3) “Top 10 Barriers to eGovernment: perspectives from a survey”, Professor Helen Margetts and Dr Rebecca Eynon, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK.


5) “Consulting the public online - opportunities, barriers and policy options”, Professor Stephen Coleman, Institute of Communication Studies, University of Leeds, UK.

6) “Cases of eConsultation in Europe: a discussion”, Professor Bill Dutton and Shefali Virkar, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK.

7) “The concept of Digital Citizen Rights: discussion of cases”, Professor Helen Margetts and Tim Hicks, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK.

Further details about each presentation are provided in the section below. PPT slides of all sessions and webcasts of the presentations by Jerry Fishenden, Chris Parker and Stephen Coleman can be accessed via the project website http://www.egovbarriers.org
2. Presentations

Session 1 Welcome, Introductions and Overview

The first session was divided into two parts. In the first Bill Dutton provided an overview of the project, outlining the overall aims of the project, the methodology employed and some of the initial findings; and went on to provide an overview of the day.

In the second part of this session, Trond-Arne Undheim in a presentation entitled, ‘Trends in European Government’, provided an overview of the status of eGovernment in Europe, highlighting the growing importance of electronic services to governments across Europe. In 2005, €11.9 billion was spent by the EU25 on such services, with 60% of this investment being made at the level of regional government. Yet only five member states have sought to measure the impact of these investments.

He went on to set out the broader framework of which the Barriers to eGovernment project is part. It is one of 36 ongoing research projects that the eGovernment Unit has commissioned. In April 2006 the i2010 eGovernment Action Plan was launched that forms part of the Commission’s i2010 plan for the development of a European Information Society. The Barriers Study, along with other EC funded research, will help to inform the implementation of the key objectives of this plan:

- putting key enablers to eGovernment in place;
- implementing high impact services;
- strengthening participation and democratic decision making;
- making efficiency and effectiveness a reality;
- ensuring that no citizen is left behind.

Several important trends surrounding eGovernment were also highlighted. Following on from the 60% figure for investment in eGovernment at the regional level, the Commission feels that the Regions are becoming a real “pain point” for eGovernment. More generally, it is common for projects to hit problems as a result of the “leadership challenge” that is presented. It was suggested that part of the problem is that information technology is often not seen as the cross-cutting, central, strategic issue that it needs to be for successful eGovernment implementations. Given the “pain” felt at regional level it could be that the “leadership challenge” is particularly prevalent there.

Despite these general implementation difficulties, some pan-European services are starting to emerge. Further, demand from citizens for such services – pan-European, or not – seems to be growing as they start to see a visible impact of public investment in this area.

Session 2  myGovernment.com: government the way you want it

Jerry Fishenden provided a wide-ranging and thought-provoking presentation on the ways in which governments could embrace the possibilities of “Web 2.0” - a programmable, XML/web services oriented construct that will see the “web” converge to the “grid”.

The “explosion of individuality” on the web was highlighted as an important trend that governments could follow. “Bidirectionality” offers great potential in this area. While private operators such as Amazon and Ebay have tapped into the idea of “users as reviewers” and even “users as producers” of information, governments have been slow to do so. The lack of such features (in the UK context, at least) is indicative of a prevailing pattern of “Web 1.0” government websites. Information is not structured, for example RSS syndication feeds are absent from the www.direct.gov.uk central web portal. It was suggested that the “tag cloud” functionality offered by websites such as http://del.icio.us be extended further. The tagging of content in this way provides a set of indicators about the interests of individuals, and “advertising” of this sort could be monitored by governments with a view to responding to them directly.

A second key topic centred around the notion of “Identity 2.0”, which was noted as the biggest challenge facing eGovernment. Jerry sketched a world in which Creative Commons-type licensing is used for citizens to control what their data is used for. In an innovative reversal of the prevailing use case, it was suggested that digital rights management (DRM) technology could be used to provide enforceable control of such licensed personal data.

In his concluding points Jerry asked does “citizen-centric public policy”, “Web 2.0”, and “Identity 2.0” constitute the “perfect storm”? 

Questions and Feedback

On the issue of participation and interactivity, and Web 2.0 more specifically, it was asked what would constitute appropriate benchmarks for these concepts. Are RSS feeds a good indicator? Jerry's response was that they are only a part of it, with the real need being to measure genuine interactivity.

A number of responses centred around the idea of the disaggregated nature of government and the extent to which technology offers the prospect of joining it up. Will technology solve the silo effect? Jerry responded that this would only be possible in a limited sense as it is difficult to keep terminology and authoring consistent across boundaries. There would be no organisational change resulting from whatever technological possibilities were made available. Another respondent argued that citizens may rather like the different relationships that they have with different arms of the state, making disaggregation a desirable characteristic. Further, isn't this something that technology actually enables? Jerry argued that aggregation of information solved problems of assimilating the vast quantities of information potentially available from government. Thus makes it possible for individuals to discover – or perhaps subscribe to – information flows on what sort of benefits they, individually, are entitled to. Questioning this “consumer-centric” idea of individual engagement with the state, another respondent suggested that an alternative notion is the “citizen-centric” one. In this relationship, the tailoring of government information to only those aspects that directly impact on each individual is seen as pernicious; it is desirable for non-drivers to care about roads, for non-parents to care
about schools, etc. The environment proposed by Jerry could, then, be corrosive to citizenship.

On the issue of organisational change, another response from the floor questioned to what extent the problem with current government offerings is the limitations of Web 1.0. If it is actually organisational issues that underlie this, then can we expect technology to change things? Another contributor also flagged these issues. Management and organisational change were held to be of key importance in realising many of the potential benefits made available by technology. Users must “trust” that a requested outcome will actually occur, and not become lost in a labyrinthine bureaucracy that succeeds only in dissipating responsibilities. These views seemed to achieve consensus among the participants.

Session 3  Top 10 Barriers to eGovernment: perspectives from a survey

Helen Margetts presented an overview of recent findings from Eurostat and the Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS). Using the Eurostat data, it was shown that, comparatively, the UK performs rather poorly in terms of electronic interaction between citizens and government. A similar story holds for business-government online interaction. For the UK in particular, the OxIS results provided further indications of failing eGovernment. Of the 60% of the population that use the internet, while 87% of citizens have sought product information online and 50% shop online at least once per month, only 39% have interacted electronically with government in the last year.

On a more positive note, taking current internet users together with those who have said that they would be able to find someone to assist them in using an online service, the “potential users of eGovernment” account for 89% of the population.

Rebecca Eynon set out some preliminary findings from the online survey that has been conducted for the Barriers to eGovernment project. The survey was aimed at public administration, business, and expert stakeholders, including academics, engaged in eGovernment activities. While the sample is not representative, it is rather wide-ranging, capturing the views of 995 respondents, from 60 countries. The importance of barriers to eGovernment was reported in a several categories:

- financial and economic;
- technical and design;
- legal;
- organisational and administrative;
- access, skill, and usage.

Following this wealth of data, the presentation concluded with a “top ten” list of barriers to eGovernment, as viewed by survey respondents from the EU.
1. Coordination across central, regional and local levels of government
2. Resistance to change by government officials
3. Lack of interoperability between IT systems
4. Low levels of Internet use among certain groups
5. Lack of political support for eGovernment
6. Lack of standards for electronic identification across the EU
7. Differences in administrative traditions and processes across the EU
8. Lack of secure electronic identification and authentication
9. ICT skills among government officials
10. Public concerns over potential for online theft and fraud

Questions and Feedback

It was contended that the (project) survey results must only be “impressionistic”, but that this is still valuable. In addition to “where would you go first to find out X?” we should also be interested in finding out “… and what was it like when you got there?”.

A second respondent commented that it was interesting that “demonstrating positive cost-benefit” of eGovernment projects was rated as an important barrier, and suspected that this would not have been the case just a few years ago when eGovernment equalled “good”. What effect had this had? Following up on this, Helen questioned whether different levels of government would feel this new constraint differently.

A word of caution was offered by one respondent who suggested that “government” means different things to different people, especially across countries. The (project) survey questions do not appear to reflect this. How do quasi-government services, like the NHS fit in, as compared to private insurance systems in other countries?

Helen asserted that the perception of lack of skills among the citizenry is important. A practitioner agreed that this was a “convenient” belief for bureaucracies to hold and perpetuate as it gives them an easy explanation for failing projects. Another participant argued that the issues faced by the successful “etailers” are likely to be different from those faced by government and bureaucracies, with trust issues being different. Others concurred on this point, suggesting that the complexity of eGovernment transactions may be higher than those in the private sector.

Tackling the apparently low levels of electronic communication with government and representatives, a question was raised about whether the figures for, say, contacting an MP were actually low. So, while 3% of people in the OxIS survey had emailed an MP, what proportion of the population had contacted them in another way? What
proportion should we expect to contact them? Does this reasoning hold for a broader class of potential citizen-government interactions?

**Session 4  Why eGovernment Programmes and Projects fail: perspectives from practice**

Seeking to provide an alternative perspective on the issue of barriers to eGovernment, Chris Parker claimed that there are no “barriers”, only “good and bad practice”. In this way, “barriers” can be reformulated as “failure to manage known risks and issues” in the implementation of eGovernment programmes. As a side point, it was noted that IT projects fail in both the public and the private sectors, but the extra public scrutiny afforded to public sector projects can give the impression of lower success rates.

A number of areas in which projects can fail were enumerated:

- Lack of clarity of goals
- Lack of user segmentation
- Lack of leadership
- Lack of stakeholder engagement
- Lack of skills
- Too little attention to breaking projects into manageable units
- Poor supplier management
  - There is often a tendency to accept the cheapest tender, not the one that offers the best overall value for money
  - Lack of cohesion across suppliers
- Lack of proactive management of downstream benefits

In summary, Parker asserted that projects that do not manage the “business change” are “just spending money on IT”. Organisational change is more than 50% of the expenditure of (successful) eGovernment projects, and a failure to recognise this reality can be very costly.

**Questions and Feedback**

The first respondent followed up on some of the themes from Chris's presentation. They felt that it was common for projects to concentrate on “outputs” not “outcomes” in a broader sense. Picking up the “lack of leadership” theme, it was also noted that projects often grew out of “the IT department”, which leads to a neglect of relevant strategic issues. For benefits to be realised, IT needs to be more than “just another cost silo”.

A second respondent agreed with the failure categories that had been set out, and felt that “management of downstream benefits” was of particular relevance. This was
held to be a surmountable barrier, the relevance of which depended on management training and upfront definitions of what organisational change should look like.

Taking a separate line, one question that was raised concerned the “additional responsibilities” that civil servants had over private sector actors. How could these be incorporated into the framework? Chris's response was that the explicit objectives were of key importance.

Finally, it was noted that the issues that had been raised in the presentation were barriers to government in general, not to eGovernment in particular. Chris agreed with this analysis, adding that eGovernment just puts these more fundamental problems into sharper focus.

Session 5 Consulting the public online - opportunities, barriers and policy options

We live in a highly “consultative” political environment, and yet people say they are not listened to. What are the barriers to effective consultation? Stephen Coleman set out three broad categories.

First, consultation can be (or be seen to be) “exclusive”, with high barriers to participation being common. A result of this exclusivity is that the biggest users of services (e.g. housing services) are the least likely to be consulted.

Second, consultation can be “consumerist”, where people speak qua “service users”, and can then simply become an extension of a “complaints ethos”. But this mode of operation lacks “citizenship”, whereby people come to have an understanding of broader trade-offs that are necessary in public policy.

Third, consultation can be “tokenist”. This can be when it is performed at too late a stage to have any effect on policy. A need for legitimation is a driver for such hollow engagement. Lack of information available to (potential) consultees can also lead to this problem.

In general, technology will not help if people do not believe they can have an influence. Theory suggests that internet technologies can be conducive to deliberative discussion (e.g. threaded, time-insensitive discussion mechanisms). However, when surveyed, people suggest that they are only willing to offer relatively small amounts of time to such endeavours – around 10 minutes per month, in many cases. Consultation for these “time-poor” citizens could potentially take the form of “qualitative polling”, which uses both the traditional closed-ended questions and space for further comments.

Survey results also suggest that the key divides in internet engagement are across gender and socioeconomic class, not age, as is popularly believed. How can women be encouraged to participate in online consultations? The platform may be relevant here. Women tend to use email, while men use the web, so enabling easier email participation may be a valuable avenue to explore. On the issue of class divides, perhaps previous consultations have not been concerned with issues that the lower classes care about.

Finally, there have been interesting results from some more innovative consultation exercises. “Deliberation” and “empathy” do appear to be possible. Examples of consultations in which people changed their minds, or at least came to better understand the positions held by others, were cited. This suggests that “winning the
“argument” and “getting your own way” are not the only ways in which consultations can be seen to be successful – for consultees or consulters.

Questions and Feedback

It was put to Stephen that simply performing surveys may not add much to debate, over and above what we tend to have now. In response, Stephen suggested that while one may set out with “market research” intentions, different, perhaps better, results are possible. He cited an example in which the UK Parliament engaged in an online consultation exercise over stem cell research. Initial expectations on the part of many MPs were very low as they feared the debate would be drowned by the two groups at polar opposites of the philosophical/religious debate. To much surprise, there was an extremely valuable contribution to the debate from disabled citizens who were enabled to contribute to an issue on which they have a unique perspective.

Another respondent questioned whether these kinds of consultation processes are truly democratic. Does it serve extremists? Can participation and views be tracked? While it may work in Europe, would such a model be appropriate for, say, Africa or South America? Stephen replied that, “yes”, democratic culture is a prerequisite. Whistle-blowing forums are more like what is required under dictatorship. He also agreed that the evolution of an individual's views has rights implications when they have been publicly expressed in the past. Another respondent added that the democracy-enhancing aspects of consultation are better seen if the analogy of “testifying” rather than “voting” is used for the process.

Finally, it was asked whether governments can and should tap into more privately arranged discussions. Stephen responded that political parties already do this, but that governments have been somewhat slower to see the benefits. Going to the discussion is a good idea, especially when the alternative is frequently to try and fail to make it come to you.

Session 6 Cases of eConsultation in Europe: a discussion

Bill Dutton and Shefali Virkar from the Oxford Internet Institute presented some preliminary findings of a case study into eConsultation that forms part of the Breaking Barriers study. Bill began the presentation by providing an overview of eConsultation, noting that as ICTs provide a means for extending electronic citizen access to public information and decision-making this opens up many new opportunities for changing who gets access to politicians and governments – as well as who politicians and governments can reach with their own messages. eConsultation is particularly relevant to the Commission, given the span of the EU and the need to develop some degree of psychological proximity between regional governments and local citizens.

The plan for the case is to look across eConsultation activities in Europe and then select a number of embedded cases from regional through to European Parliamentary level. The research will seek to examine aspects of good practice, analyze legal and organisational obstacles to further activity and recommend potential policy implications.
Shefali presented a number of interesting cases, such as, Bristol City Council (http://www.bristol-city.gov.uk); Madrid Participa (http://www.madridparticipa.org); Scottish Parliamentary Initiative (http://www.scottish.parliament.uk); and Toute l'Europe (http://www.info-europe.fr/debat), noting that privacy and data protection had emerged as a key potential barrier to the success of eConsultations.

Questions and Feedback

There was some discussion amongst the group as to whether concerns about privacy and data protection really were the most significant barriers to eConsultation as issues around accessibility (both in terms of access and ease of use) and convenience of participation may be more important.

One comment raised by the group was that it may be of interest to tease out very innovative eConsultation practices as opposed to exploring well established cases that have already been researched and / or have good visibility. A further issue that could be explored is eDiscussions and how this plays into official policy making. That is, to what extent should governments tap into this resource, for example, via data mining. As noted above, if this kind of data is being collected elsewhere, perhaps governments should go to existing spaces where this activity is being carried out as opposed to trying to set up new forums.

Session 7 The concept of Digital Citizen Rights: discussion of cases

Helen Margetts began the presentation setting out the three possible ways in which the project members had considered approaching a “digital citizen rights” (DCR) case study in the sphere of barriers to eGovernment. The first was “barriers to asserting DCR”. In this scheme, rights are seen as the dependent variable, with low eGovernment take-up as a potential barrier. However, this formulation conflicted with a stronger hypothesis that stemmed from the second and third conceptions of the relationship between DCR and eGovernment.

These alternative approaches to the case study were then outlined by Tim Hicks, who discussed “DCR as a barrier to eGovernment” and “DCR as an enabler to eGovernment”. In both of these understandings, rights is seen as an explanatory variable, with eGovernment take-up/usage as the dependent variable. Depending on the conception and measurement of DCR, it is plausible to suggest that they could have either positive or negative impacts on eGovernment. For example, granting a right to electronic communication with particular branches of government is likely to lead to greater take-up of electronic communication with government. On the other hand, very strong data protection laws may be an impediment to the efficient reuse of information, thus limiting the potential gains from “joined-up” eGovernment programmes.

As indicated, the formulations with rights as explanatory variables to eGovernment take-up were the preferred way forward for the project members. However, a number of questions were posed. While a fairly clear quantitative empirical model for such a relationship was put forward, the traction that it could provide would be dependent upon obtaining reasonably accurate numeric measurements for DCR. A major question, then, was how this could be achieved.

Anticipating some difficulties with this approach, it was also suggested that the case study would include a two or three country qualitative comparative study. So,
Another question for the assembled guests was which countries would provide valuable comparisons. Preliminary thoughts among the project team had led to the idea of selecting two countries that were as similar as possible across all “control” variables, but with differences in eGovernment take-up and DCR levels.

**Questions and Feedback**

A number of participants were sceptical that trying to measure differences in Data Protection legislation in member states and / or Freedom of Information Acts would provide a productive way of quantifying DCR; particularly as other factors in a member state, such as, the openness of a society and the levels of trust would be important and interrelate. A further consideration is the differences between the levels of digital rights in law and how they translate into practice. One participant suggested that a potential alternative would be to run the regressions of the other variables discussed in the presentation and then look in depth at the member states that are the outliers and see if potential measures of DCR vary in these countries. Another potential avenue would be to involve national citizen rights organisations and digital rights organisations with the project.

While there are a number of difficulties with measuring DCR it is an important issue for the European Commission as potentially citizens of member states could begin to demand a right to interact with government electronically. Also, DCR have implications for providing multi channel access to government and government decisions as to whether to close or continue certain channels.

**3. Value to the Project**

In the final part of the day, participants were invited to share their thoughts on the event with the rest of the group. Many themes were raised: the legal implications of the changes that were occurring in the eGovernment landscape (e.g. data protection guidelines when citizens are now sometimes creators of their own content); the contradictory forces of reality and vision eGovernment; the ghettoization of eGovernment from the rest of Government and whether the prefix of the “e” helps or hinders progress; the lack of attention to the regional level of eGovernment; the importance of intermediaries; the relationship between online and offline interactions between governments and citizens and how they may differ; the reductionist way eGovernment is often discussed merely in terms of eServices; the need for expectations to be based on a longer time frame; change management issues; and the distance between citizens and levels of government.

The workshop was a valuable event for the project, advertising the project more widely and stimulating interesting debate throughout the event. Unlike the previous two workshops, this event encompassed a largely UK audience and thus webcasts of the events have been placed on the website in order for interested stakeholders from other countries to engage with the debate. The workshop has also informed thinking about the development of the research and as the event was tape recorded further analysis of the discussions will be incorporated into the ongoing research. The next step is to progress the two case studies DCR and eConsultations and to follow up the numerous suggestions, examples and cases studies raised on the day.

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2 A webcast of the event is available on the project website.
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