

A PRIMER ON e-GOVERNANCE

Why is e-Governance the new buzz word ?

The colonial view of the Government used to be as a 'controller' and 'ruler'. It is now that of a coordinator and provider. The government is responsible for providing certain services to the citizens, just like a corporation is responsible for managing a value chain that leads to output. Business corporations have discovered over the last few decades that information technology can make the value chain more efficient and lead to quality increase and cost savings. Similarly Government, have discovered that information technology can make the provision of the services to the citizen more efficient, transparent, can save costs and lead to a higher level of efficiency.

This application of information technology enabled processes and system is called e-Governance, or e-Government as it is called in the USA. Some analysis say that e-governance is the final delivery of services to the citizens and e-Government is the tool to accomplish e-Governance.

However, semantics apart, it is clear that e-governance involves information technology enabled initiatives that are used for improving -

- (i) The interaction between government and citizens or government and businesses, as well as
- (ii) The internal government operations to simplify and the operation of the government itself as an entity.

What do most e-governance initiatives involve?

The term 'interaction' in the preceding paragraph can be understood as every point where the citizen interfaces with the government – delivery of government. Products (distribution of the MTNL directory) and services (hospitals, police stations), access to government Information (how to apply for land in an industrial zone), and Transactions (applying for a driving license).

The term 'Government Operations' includes the business processes of the government as an entity at every level – central, national, regional, provincial, departmental and local institutions. So there can probably be three aspects to e-governance.

- a) **Information Technology frameworks** (a couple of decades ago called 'computerisation') of the government functions – something similar to back-office automation in business – which will lead to digitization or e-documentation, the ability to store, access, retrieve and share information electronically.

- b) **Citizen Access** for which the usual route adopted is sharing information through website, but it could be more interesting and varied through kiosks.
- c) **Government process improvement**, which is an exercise in legislation (Right to Information Acts), culture (openness, accountability) and management (training officers in the 'new' way of governance) so that effectiveness and efficiency may be achieved.

Why should governments adopt e-Governance?

A cute acronym has been coined for these possible results of e-governance – SMART, which stands for Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent Governments. If the premise of e-Governance is to improve the provision of services to citizens, then of course, the question to ask is whether the government actually wants to do so. Obvious as the benefits may seem, the biggest challenge to implementing e-governance is to overcome the temptation of power that flow from Monopoly and absence of Transparency and Accountability to the Citizen. Take away this power, and most pieces fall into the right place very fast.

Governments must be willing to decentralize responsibilities and processes. The information technology infrastructure should primarily serve to increase information flow between government community citizen. Besides, faster, effective and timely government services, there would be the evolution of a culture of self-service where citizens get into the habit of helping themselves rather than depending upon the government for every step. Government officials can then focus on where they are needed the most. This will also lead to governments in every form and at every level to become more integrated into the community.

Why is e-Governance assumed to be 'difficult'?

Without a full understanding of the scope of e-government, the peril is that many good intentions (and many crores of investment rupees) will fall by the wayside. Some of the problems that make e-Governance difficult are:

- a) Bureaucrats are generalists, not specialists in information technology
- b) Information Technology companies have a clear interest in spreading disinformation to make governments buy more than they can use.
- c) Projects are sometimes done only for their 'showcase' value, like setting up a website for a government department, that is then never updated.
- d) Projects are done half-way because of the hopeless nature of the politically-induced transfer politics in most Indian governments

But the single largest reason for the failure of e-Governance initiatives in India is the fact that the subject is not well understood. But no means are is this problem unique to Governments. Examples abound even in the private sector where business organizations have only superficially understood and marginally implemented strategic initiatives. Remember the waves about 'TQM' (Total Quality Management) and JIT (Just in Time)? However, what is encouraging is that those who understood embraced real transformation were winners.

What are the practical benefits of e-Governance?

There are thousands of ways in which intelligent bureaucrats and politicians around the world are using e-governance initiatives to bring about a positive change in the government citizen interaction. Here are a few examples:

Simpler Documentation: Digitisation of Land Records

One of the major problems a member of the public face is to get access to their land records. In many countries, this has been one of the priority areas for application of IT. Coupled with GIS, the decentralized databases can hold the local level land records allowing easy access through dedicated terminals. The transfer and registration of deeds can also be made much easier. The implementation of a nation-wide project would eliminate a lot of hassle for all citizens and can bring the fruits of IT revolution to the doorsteps of ordinary citizens. This will also drastically reduce the number of litigations arising from land-related disputes.

Faster Applications: Redressing Public Grievances

Under the present system, citizens can ventilate their governance through applications/letters addressed to appropriate authorities. Unfortunately, acknowledgement of receipt of these letters and responding to these letters are almost totally absent in our "government culture". In the absence of such mechanism, many of the citizens have to spend a lot of efforts to get access to Minister or other high officials. Our Constitution provides for the creation of an office of Ombudsman but even through almost three decades have elapsed since adoption of the Constitution; we are yet to see its implementation. Many countries have introduced the system of using e-mails to ventilate the grievances with a lot of success. In fact, homepages of the Head of Government and Ministers in many countries contain a link for directly sending e-mails to them. These are acknowledged within a few minute (sometimes using Auto responder software) and the actions taken are intimated within a few days.

Simpler Procurement: Goods and Services at lower cost

The Government in our country is still the largest purchaser of various goods and largest user of services (such as consultancy services) and implementation

agency for various construction projects. The rules require competitive bidding for all but the smallest of purchases (which can be done through spot quotations). In order to meet the procedural requirements, advertisement in newspaper is mandatory. With the proliferation of newspapers in the country, it is very difficult for intending suppliers to keep track of all these notices. These problems can be eliminated by resorting to use of internet. For example, the web sites of the agencies can have all the procurement notices along with the relevant details (e.g. specifications, eligibility criteria, and bidding document) which can be downloaded by the bidders. At a later stage, the responses (like tender or consultancy proposals) can also be submitted using electric communication. This is now recognized as a form of e-Commerce abbreviated as B2G (Business to Government).

Greater Reach of Services: Making the most of limited resources

One of the major weaknesses in our health care system (particularly in the rural areas) is the lack of availability trained doctors. It may not be possible to post specialist doctors in every village. However, if these centers are connected to district level hospitals and national hospitals that have specialists in various medical disciplines, a doctor or a paramedic can get online advice related to a patient.

Accelerating Education: Doing more with less money

Information technology can significantly contribute to improvement of our education system in a number of areas, e.g. in managing the large number of educational institutions (particularly the primary and secondary schools) as well as in actual delivery of education. The present school system suffers from a lack of trained teachers, and therefore CD-based courseware or video-based distance education programs can be of great assistance to the teachers as well as students to overcome some of the weaknesses. Moreover, once the schools are connected to the Internet, the students and teachers can have access to most of the well-known libraries in the world, where books, periodicals and reports in digital format are freely available. The development of a Distance Learning System with courses delivered over the Internet can be of great help at all levels of education and training. The results of all public examinations can also be put on the Web.

Public Participation: Making Legislation interactive

The present system of enactment of legislation does not have much scope for public participation. In fact, in almost all parliamentary debates related to any bill, we see the Members of Parliament from the opposition proposing that the bill be sent for eliciting public opinion but the proposal is almost never accepted. However, the Internet provides an easy route for getting public opinion.

Simplifying Transactions: Payment of Utility Bills

In urban areas, almost all the households have to interact with various utility agencies like power supply, water supply, gas and telecommunications. Even in the routine this is a tiresome task and very often a user has a grievance of an inaccurate bill which requires a number of visits to various offices for resolution. These can be resolved through electric communication which can be carried out by the consumer at his own convenience rather than wasting valuable office time. The inconvenience of payment of bills can be avoided by resorting to electric fund transfer.

Inexpensive Deterrent: Maintaining Law and Order

The installation of inexpensive Web cams connected to Police Headquarters for continuous recording at selected locations in large urban areas can be a deterrent to crime, as has been the experience of some cities in Western Europe. Filing of FIRs over the Internet has also been used with success in some countries. Computers have been successfully used for storage of information about crimes and criminals. By providing access to these databases from different police stations or even hand held devices by police officials on the move, the job of tracking down criminals has become relatively easier.

Inexpensive Deterrent: Post Offices

All the post offices in many countries have been connected to the internet. This enables the transmission of e-mails by members of public and hand delivery to the recipients (who do not have access to Internet). Moreover, public kiosks can be located in these post offices to enable member of public to send and receive e-mails.

Simplifying Interaction: Municipalities

Members of the public often have to interact with the City Corporation or Municipality offices for a variety of services like the payment of holding tax, obtaining trade licenses, registration of births and deaths. These interactions can easily be carried out over the Internet.

Incentive for Payment: Making Taxes and Levies easier

As Electronic Fund Transfer gains popularity, many of the taxes and levies which the citizens have to pay may also be paid through the internet through debit or credit cards. The filing of income tax returns can also be done through the internet.

Making Recruitment Faster; Hiring Personnel

The government and government agencies are still the largest employers in our country. Thousands of employees are recruited at different levels every year. A central government web site can be developed to provide all the recruitment announcements, so that the applicants need not scan the large number of newspapers, which in many cases are difficult to access from rural areas. The next step would be the electronic submission of applications to the relevant agencies through e-mails. The web sites of these agencies can also provide the information related to latest status of the application.

Making a Permanent Library: Policy Documents for reference

All policy documents of government can be placed on the Web and be constantly updated. For example, documents like the Budget, specific plans can be placed alongwith the official gazettes.

There are limitless possibilities. What must be understood is that once there is a clear understanding of the issues involved and the sincerity to resolve them, there can be an amazing number of innovations in governance.