

Citizenlink, the missing link in e-government

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Cooperation is the name of the game

During the last 10 years, almost every country has adopted a kind of e-government strategy. Although these strategies differ according to nation and culture, there is a remarkable similarity. Not surprisingly most governments have been preoccupied with efficiency, since it will save costs for the supplier and reduce administrative burdens for citizens and businesses. Also there is much emphasis on digitisation.

However, by now every one knows that e-government is not about technology, but about organisation (workflow and process) and about people (skills and attitude). So the main task ahead is procedural change and business redesign. This means designing new ways in which to serve the customer, instead of automating existing products and processes. Moreover, government agencies can't change separately. Both challenges and benefits lie in cooperation, within and between public organisations.

The citizen, the missing link

Although most e-government strategies claim to take the citizen into account, many strategies are rather supply oriented. It is not just because the focus is on infrastructure. Bias also results from the administration selecting and deciding upon the projects. In addition, there is a tendency to focus on service delivery, whereas this is only one area of contacts between citizen and government. This neglects the fact that the citizen is not only a customer but also, or even more so, an inhabitant or a participant.

e-Government should take this wider, multipurpose relationship into account. Citizens should also be given more opportunity to present their views on topics like quality, satisfaction and involvement.

It's the interoperability, stupid!

Many public organisations strive to improve their services by trying to make them citizen centric. The good news is that they are inventing the customer. The bad news is that each organisation is doing this on its own, forgetting that you and I are a customer of many organisations.

An organisation's drive to improve its own performance is not enough or can even be counterproductive. It may very well result in transforming the paper bureaucracy of the past into a virtual bureaucracy in the future. Chain service delivery is the road to citizen satisfaction. So the real option is to design modular solutions which can be combined and connected according to the needs of the customer. Common solutions based on standards are needed.

Interoperability is both necessary and helpful. Without it, there is no e-government in the real sense of the word. Some government official is certainly not the one and only person having to cope with all changes. His or her counterpart in different organisations and other countries is dealing with the same problem. Together they can solve it better. Only together they will succeed. This is at the same time a comforting and a challenging thought.

Interoperability should therefore be at the basis of any policy for modernizing government. In the wider context of the European Union and its member states, it is a method of harmonization which combines the advantages of integration without the disadvantages of centralization. Seamless or joined up services are not feasible without agreements on interoperability.

Linking citizen & government

From its very beginning, Dutch e-government strategy has aspired to be citizen-centred. Actually the first initiative, started in 1996, was the one-stop-shop service delivery programme called OL2000 (Overheidsloket 2000 / Public Counter 2000). It promoted the concept of 'thinking and working from the citizen's perspective.' At the end of the 1990's it was accompanied by several other programmes dealing with other aspects of government reform. In 2001 it was decided to merge the then existing twenty separate programmes into ICTU, a joint implementation organisation for ICT in the public sector. In ICTU all tiers of Dutch government (state, provinces, municipalities and water boards) have pooled their efforts and resources for research and development in the field of e-government solutions.

During 2002 the minister responsible for government reform conceived of the idea of an independent forum which would look critically into these developments from the citizen's point of view. To that end the e-Citizen Programme was started in 2003 with the task of being a critical evaluator of e-government solutions. Beginning 2008 it has been succeeded by Citizenlink, an initiative of the Dutch government to improve public performance by involving citizens. This programme runs for three years as part of ICTU and has the following tasks:

- promote service quality (adoption of e-Citizen Charter & Quality Codes)
- measure customer satisfaction (conduct an annual national survey about life events)
- stimulate citizen involvement (develop e-Participation Instruments).

In each of these fields the approach taken is: standardisation to support interoperability.

e-Quality as the road to equality

Almost every organisation tells you that it wants to improve its quality, but what exactly is good (or rather excellent) quality? Usually a selection of ambitions is made, resulting in a random number of goals. However, since cooperation is the name of the game, organisations have to agree on one quality standard when they are going to provide integrated services.

The Dutch e-Citizen Programme has developed an e-Citizen Charter. This charter is written from the citizens' perspective and consists of ten quality requirements for digital contacts. Each requirement is formulated as a right of a citizen with a corresponding obligation of government. The charter is meant for both citizen and government. It allows citizens to call their government to account for the quality of digital services. Government can use the charter to examine external quality of its public performance. The requirements are based on research into existing quality systems and several surveys of citizen's expectations. The Charter is reproduced at the end of this chapter.

Since its introduction in 2005, e-Citizen Charter has been widely adopted in The Netherlands. It has also gained international recognition. Not only have OECD and UN recommended this approach, the Charter also won the European e-Democracy Award 2007 of the Global Forum. It has also received the EU e-Government Good Practice Label 2007.

To be meaningful for customers, the ten requirements actually have to be made specific and formulated in a Quality Code. Each public organisation in the Netherlands is supposed to have adopted in the year 2010 such a code containing concrete promises about service quality and an offer to provide for compensation in case of non compliance.

You can get satisfaction

It doesn't suffice to proclaim quality requirements. Compliance should be measured, too. Citizen satisfaction does however not only result from digital or speedy delivery of individual products or services. The main complaint about government is that people don't know what the solution is to their problem and, if they happen to know, where to apply for it.

In order to assess citizen satisfaction about government performance as a whole, in the beginning of 2008 a national survey was conducted in which satisfaction was measured by asking citizens about real experiences with solving life events. Evaluation was based on the ten criteria of the e-Citizen Charter. One of the main findings was that the higher the number of organisations involved, the lower the level of satisfaction. Obviously, this survey produced a lot of information where and when things went right or wrong, and why. It will be used to remedy chain delivery deficiencies. This general survey will be repeated annually while its model will be adapted to both an instrument for local or sectoral use and as a self test for citizens and businesses.

e-Participation: Mission impossible?

Because of its origin in administrative reform, e-government until now has very much concentrated on service delivery. But supposing the new virtual infrastructure is in place, how can it enhance citizen involvement? What can it add to democracy and inclusion?

e-Participation is conceived of as using the new media to involve citizens in improving service delivery and democratic decision making. Some people are expecting a breakthrough in involvement, whereas others take the attitude that much still remains to be seen. As for democracy, some basic issues have to be

considered. Democracy in modern nation states is representative democracy. Although there is much talk about the democratic deficit, or gap, there are not many advocates for direct e-democracy. Before looking into promising ways of revitalising representative democracy, some words of warning might be appropriate:

- First of all, the present state of the technology lacks sufficient safeguards. Internet is inherently unreliable, chip cards can simply be hacked, and identity fraud is easily committed, to name just a few problems. Because of this vulnerability, all e-voting projects in the Netherlands have been abandoned. As of next year in all elections there will be — again — a paper ballot!
- Secondly, among the general public sufficient e-skills and awareness are lacking and accessibility is not guaranteed. A recent survey in the Netherlands showed that a large number of people could not find basic information on their rights and obligations, or file a complaint. So access and inclusion is not only a problem for handicapped, deprived or disabled people, but also for citizens in general.
- Thirdly, data protection which is already a hot issue in service delivery is more sensitive in political participation. Issues of data retention, data mining, preventing infringements and misuse have not been properly identified, let alone resolved.
- Finally, politics basically is about solving conflicts of interest or bridging different views. It means that informed decisions have to be made and politicians have to meet the consequences of their behaviour. Ordinary citizens who may have expert opinions can be invited to share these, but cannot be held responsible for their choices in policy issues. Whatever the criticism of political parties and how necessary a role change might be, an alternative to this model doesn't yet exist.

My standard, or our standard?

These basic issues have to be discussed and these problems have to be solved, before large scale operational e-democracy services can be introduced. In the meantime there is room for experiments and pilots.

The present state of affairs in e-participation can be characterised as 'let many flowers blossom.' Looking at the maturity cycle that is common in innovation, in due time a number of feasible projects will survive. The Citizenlink approach in the Netherlands consists of modelling and standardising promising instruments in the field of information, services, politics and cohesion. Below, some examples are briefly described. These address the possibilities of increasing transparency, reducing complexity of decision making and supporting involvement.

Issuefeeds

Government is generally able to collect information about popular opinions and preferences as they are published or distributed in the analogue world. In order to be able to do the same in the digital world, an instrument is designed supporting civil servants finding the relevant information about issues in the 'second society.'

WeEvaluate

Copying the example of rating websites which gather information about commercial services (restaurants, for example) and thereby create (or destroy) reputation, a website has been started for citizens to evaluate public services. They can design their own rating system or they can use a simplified model of the National Citizen Satisfaction Survey mentioned before.

TrackYourCouncil

One of the Dutch successes in using the Internet during election time has been the Voting Assistant. This provides a comparison between the programmes of political parties on the basis of thirty main issues. It helps voters making their choice. At the recent national elections about five million voters (almost half of those eligible to vote) used the Voting Assistant.

Since it is more helpful to make your electoral choice on actual behaviour than on future promises, another instrument is being developed: a Voting Tracker which assembles the voting record of parties and politicians and thus makes transparent what their positions have been on certain issues.

e-Petitions

According to Dutch law, citizens are entitled to start a so-called citizen initiative. When enough people support a particular issue, it can be tabled with a representative body like a city council or with parliament, which then has to discuss it. This is similar to the right of petition. The Internet can be quite a help to gather the required number of signatures, so a website to this end has been started. A number of Dutch municipalities have created their own portal on this website.

Perform or perish

By specifying quality requirements, measuring whether or not citizens are more satisfied and involving them in further improving the outcome, government organisations can make a start to perform better. This is necessary to stay reliable and remain trustworthy.

In order to reap the benefits of citizen-centred e-government, public organisations need to adopt an integrative and iterative approach. The Citizenlink Performance Improvement Incentive recommends public organisations to take the following steps (by the appropriate group):

- adopt the e-Citizen Charter as the standard (city council)
- specify a Quality Code for all departments that serve customers (executive board)
- measure citizen satisfaction regularly (departments)
- involve customers (citizens)
- account annually for Improvements (mayor).

Facelift or make-over?

e-Government as we know it tries to improve the working of the existing public infrastructure. As such it is a change process in administration, and a tough one

at that. However, when only conceived of in this way, such an approach lacks the necessary vision to create a new relationship between society and government. Even when, in the best of his interests, the citizen 'is being put in the centre by government, the question arises: shouldn't it be the other way round?

We need a new paradigm in which e-government is being reinvented according to the future needs of an e-society. This is not about convenience but about creating public value. To give just an example', a building permit is not a 'product' to be delivered as easily as possible to the applicant, but a guarantee that my neighbour doesn't act against my interests by building a monstrous roof vault taking away my sunshine. So the question is not how to implement a digital transaction, but to design a new model for implementing the social contract that government is to guard in the common interest.

Developments like Web 2.0, and beyond, will provide citizens new ways to communicate and deal in their neighborhood, city, country, and the world. At the same time these create the possibility to reconcile contradictory ambitions arising out of erecting a virtual state on the foundations of an old fashioned state system. To name just a few: multiple identities and anonymity; privacy and security; legal autonomy, countervailing powers and seamless services; financing common infrastructure; private delivery of public goods; secure access to digital files and records; etcetera.

e-Government needs first of all to shift focus from service delivery to other public tasks, such as political decision making and societal inclusion. Secondly, it should be reinvented from the point of view of what is erroneously termed the end-user but essentially is the begin-user: the e-citizen. A facelift won't do; an extreme make over is unavoidable.

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1. Choice of Channel

As a citizen I can choose for myself in which way to interact with government. Government ensures multi channel service delivery, i.e. the availability of all communication channels: counter, letter, phone, e-mail, internet.

2. Transparent Public Sector

As a citizen I know where to apply for official information and public services. Government guaranties one-stop-shop service delivery and acts as one seamless entity with no wrong doors.

3. Overview of Rights & Obligations

As a citizen I know which services I am entitled to under which conditions. Government ensures that my rights and obligations are at all times transparent.

4. Personalized Information

As a citizen I am entitled to information that is complete, up to date and consistent. Government supplies appropriate information tailored to my needs.

5. Convenient Services

As a citizen I can choose to provide personal data once and to be served in a proactive way. Government makes clear what records it keeps about me and does not use data without my consent.

6. Comprehensive Procedures

As a citizen I can easily get to know how government works and monitor progress. Government keeps me informed of procedures I am involved in by way of tracking and tracing.

7. Trust & Reliability

As a citizen I presume government to be electronically competent. Government guarantees secure identity management and reliable storage of electronic documents.

8. Considerate Administration

As a citizen I can file ideas for improvement and lodge complaints. Government compensates for mistakes and uses feedback information to improve its products and procedures.

9. Accountability & Benchmarking

As a citizen I am able to compare, check and measure government outcome. Government actively supplies benchmark information about its performance.

10. Involvement & Empowerment

As a citizen I am invited to participate in decision-making and to promote my interests. Government supports empowerment and ensures that the necessary information and instruments are available