e-Citizen: Why Waiting for the Governments?

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Abstract. The State of the Art in Electronic Government is the delivering of public services to the Citizen by means of integrated web portals, comprising the public agencies in the different levels of government, aiming to hide from the final user the complexity of the State bureaucracy. Ideally, these portals should be designed according to the mental patterns of the individuals, with their navigation oriented by the life events, and not by the logic of bureaucracy. Besides, the services to be provided must match both the Citizen's and the State's interests. Considering that many e-Government portals do not follow these principles, this article proposes an inversion in the policy of access to public services. By breaking paradigms, it presents the organized society as the drive engine behind the construction of integrated portals, with contents and shape to match citizen's interests, rather than waiting for the government action.

1 The New Context of the Public Services in the Digital Era

The use of Internet has been promoting changes in the way organizations provide services to society. In the last decade the Internet has been solidifying itself as the great propeller of development in the business arena, eliminating barriers of time and space, and bringing convenience and comfort to the individuals. More than ever these individuals want to interact with the organizations at the time, the place and the way they deem adequate, preferably without intermediate steps of any sort. In the competitive world, the waste of personal time is less and less tolerated and the promptness in the replies more and more appreciated [1], [2].

There is an evident change in the relationship between the organizations and their target public, forcing the inclusion of Internet as a service delivery channel in business strategies. The private companies invest on the Internet pursuing continuous cost reduction, quality increase, and product or service differentiation, aiming to seize market share in a global and highly competitive world [3].

From the moment the customers acquire the power in their relationship with the private companies, taking control and conducting business their way [1], [3], [4], they start to feel the need of interacting with the State in the same manner. It must be considered though that the Citizen does not always interact with the State because they like it or want it, but rather because they need it and have no other choice, and also because they have the right to [5]. And provided that the access to the State is

financed by tax money, the individuals are not keen on taking on the burden of the inefficiency of the public administration.

2 The Response Expected by Society

What the society expects from the e-Governments is a web portal of public services that is able to bring to the Citizen the same level of comfort and convenience that they find in the private sector. This portal must be built according to a new philosophy, with a new structure of navigation, emphasizing the way of thinking of the individual and no longer the logic of bureaucracy [5], [6]. In the logic of the common Citizen, they want to start a business, pay a tribute, set an appointment with a doctor or enrol their children in a public school. They do not need to know which level of government the school administration is part of, what public offices are involved in the starting of a business, which division they need to pay their taxes to or who is responsible for the public health care system.

In the same way that place and time are no longer restrictive barriers on the Internet, the hierarchy and departmentalisation of the State have no longer significance, because the structure of the State can work in networks where all the public offices involved in the provision of services are interconnected. The Citizen accesses a web portal which is organized by services representing life events, and no longer by the structure of State. Following the location of the required service by the user, the navigation system takes charge of integrating the several government agencies in a seamless way to conduct the individual to its completion [7]. It becomes unnecessary to understand how the State is organized, as well as which peripheral instruments are needed to complete the process, such as the telephone, the e-mail and personal visits to the respective divisions or public offices. Everything that does not depend on the physical presence of the Citizen can be attained by touching the keyboard of a personal computer.

An integrated web portal of public services focused on the Citizen is conceivable on the grounds that the Citizen is unique in their contrast with the State, thus needing to identify themselves only once to the portal to gain access to all services they require. Once identified, the individual can perform secure online transactions to whichever service, without the need of knowing which department is providing them. A service access gateway drives the communication according to the demands of the user and takes charge of establishing the necessary navigation steps, in case one or more government departments need to be put together for the completion of the task [8].

One of the existing web portals that implement the concept of gateway is of the British Government (www.direct.gov.uk) [8]. A successful example of web portal focused on the Citizen is the Singapore's e-Citizen (www.e-citizen.sg) [1], [7], [9]. In Brazil, the state government of Minas Gerais has recently implemented a new portal based on life events navigation (www.mg.gov.br).

Adopting this new focus in Electronic Government is nothing more than applying the concepts of automated integration of business processes that private companies normally perform, in the pursuit of establishing added value chains and thus caring

for their customers in a competitive way, reducing costs, improving quality, increasing the responsiveness of operations and bringing down the time to market [10].

3 Barriers in the Introduction of the New Concepts

The adoption of the new model, however, requires cultural changes and a transformation in the relationship between the government structures, in the same way that private companies have been transforming their processes to overcome the impacts of the Internet competition. The gains for the Citizen will only be achieved through a complete rethinking of the government process, by eliminating the complexities of the off-line world. It is not enough to simply provide the same old services on the internet, on pain of perpetuating bureaucracy. The Internet presents itself as an opportunity for the State to redesign its services to cater for the effective needs of the Citizens and at the same time maintain its structure in a more cost-effective way, making possible a more efficient public governance.

The required transformations, however, are doomed by complexity, calling for considerable effort and political will for their implementation. The service mix is large and its spanning throughout different government departments requires sometimes complex co-operation among them [9], [11]. Besides, in some cases, the service delivery can involve different levels of government, partnerships with non-governmental entities or even with private companies [5]. Those difficulties are not technology-related, but of social, organizational and institutional nature, and their overcoming depends on the capacity of the different players in exploiting the potentiality that technology offers [5], [12].

The technologies of the Internet and the concept of integrated public service portals are more and more vital for the State to accomplish its obligations towards its citizens with the same efficiency in which it levies taxes. However, it needs to be clear that the real transformations will come not only from the availability of services on the Internet, but from a re-design of the State as a whole, putting the Citizen as the centre of attentions [11], [12].

In this sense the Citizen is more and more demanding. He exerts pressure and many governments begin to realize that they need to supply a better service to broaden the democratic participation and give more transparency of its acts to its citizens. With this in mind, governmental institutions invest in programs of e-Government, because the use of the Internet improves the governance and contributes to the full exercise of citizenship by their people [9]. Taking into account that its implementation implies in gains for the society as well as for the economy of the State, it is harder and harder to find justification for the lack of investments in the improvement of the public service delivery on the Internet.

4 Electronic Government Still Privileges the State

Nevertheless, the vast majority of electronic government programs are in their incipient stage [7]. The efforts are still quite isolated between public offices, each one contemplating the Citizen their own way, under their own logic and implementing services according to their own interests. The e-Government portals, unified access points to services and information, are created according to the bureaucratic logic, reflecting this way the very own structure of the State. In order to access a service, it is necessary that the individual knows which departments are responsible for that service. The same way he peregrinates through the counters of bureaucracy to obtain services in the conventional way, the citizen navigates through the guts of the digital bureaucracy until being able to complete (if lucky) his electronic transaction.

A case study conducted to evaluate the public services delivery to the residents of the city of Curitiba, state of Parana, Brazil, revealed that the priority in the implementation of the online public services regards the interest of the State [13]. Analysing the three levels of government (local, state and national) under the viewpoint of the integrated web portals, the tax collecting (68%) and drivers and vehicles licence control (78%) had completion rates significantly higher than health (28%) and education (28%) services. The methodology to evaluate the completion rates took into account the services that can be performed without the physical intervention of the individual, and the possibility of integration between the departments and levels of governments for the provision of each service, and traces a comparison to what is actually found in practice.

The questioning is not towards the high rates obtained by the tax collection services, because those are vital for the well functioning of the State. The easier the control of tax collection is, the more budget there will be, a part of which can be allocated to the supply of public services. The problem the survey shows is that the application of this money does not occur in the same intensity for those services of higher interest to the citizen.

The survey also shows that the concept of service gateway for the authentication and navigation oriented by the mental pattern of the individual and by life events has not been implemented. And there seems to be a long way between this vision and reality.

The methodology applied to the research does not allow for generalizations, but taking into account that the City of Curitiba boasts development indexes and life standards comparable to large cities in more developed countries, it is expected that a similar situation is to be found in the majority of cities throughout the world.

5 Electronic Citizen and Electronic Government

Based on the analysis of the international scenario featuring the public services on the internet, and the results of the above mentioned survey, a new proposition comes to light, and a new emphasis to break the current paradigm becomes more deign of discussion: the concept of *Electronic Citizen*. In contrast with *Electronic Government*, which is used worldwide and prioritises the services in the interest of the State,

Electronic Citizen, delivered for instance in Singapore [1], [7], [9], puts a higher priority on the Citizen.

There are some governments worldwide working on this concept, focusing the Citizen in the centre of their e-government programs, but the majority are still in the old bureaucratic age, in the earlier stages of services providing. For these governments, that could not achieve yet the new vision, the question to be made is: why waiting for their actions? Why can not society take on the responsibility for having the initiative of the development and the deployment of the service portals emphasising the citizen, organizing them according to their own interests?

The establishment of partnerships for the implementation of e-Government programmes is supported by many researchers as a mean of leveraging their development. All sorts of partners can give their contribution, amongst them the very own public offices, as well as private entities, universities, research centres and non-governmental organizations [5], [14]. These partnership have been proposed as e-government intermediation or government service provision [19].

However, the typical approach is that the government searches those partnerships to carry out its projects established, here again, in order to pursue its own interests. Many governments have been choosing partners for improving their services supplying in many ways like for instance: introducing new technologies, re-engineering business process, training of public employees, deploying new applications, creating or expanding channels for access to the services. Examples can be found in United Kingdom [17] and Italy [18] and other countries worldwide.

The aim herein is not to discuss these cases of typical partnership but to bring as innovation the proposition of a new approach: the society organized by means of non-governmental institutions, for instance, taking charge of searching the desired partnerships, specially with the State, and thereby leading the new services, planning them, deploying the application systems, operating the services portal, training the communities for using and so on. Evidently the State will be always strongly involved in all the processes, but not necessarily should be the one to take the initiative. That is a way of the society to choose by itself the preferable channels to access the public services and moreover to induce the government to deploy new services of its own interests. It does not mean any kind of responsibility transference from the State to the Citizen but a new way of organizing the public services access.

The proposal is for an alternative channel for the Citizen to access public services the same way he does for private companies services. The public services will continue to be provided by the State in the former way to those who can not or do not want to have access by Internet.

6 The Drivers for the New Approach

This proposition is based on the assumption that no technological difficulties are to be overcome for the adoption of the new concepts in electronic government. Every technology adopted by the private sector can be used for the delivery of public services on the internet [3], [9].

Normally governments have many applications for its business processes that are restrained to the internal bureaucracy of its departments. These applications can be kept in the same way they have been implemented, as legacy systems. Running over these processes, an integrated access web portal can be constructed with a unique authentication gateway, and offering to the user a seamless and comprehensible navigation platform reproducing the life events and hiding from the Citizen the complexity of their interconnections. The integration of the legacy systems becomes easier with the adoption of tools such as web services [15], [16] and other technologies [19].

Moreover, the new technologies or solutions already existing on leadings e-government programs are ready to be used by emerging ones worldwide. That means no new technologies and solutions are required for the new approach but those now applied in e-government programs conceived under the traditional concepts. The innovations rely on the changes in the processes for outperforming the services access.

Some fostering issues for the new approach seem to be interesting to discuss as:

1. The new model can be extended also to incorporate services of private organizations on these integrated portals. In this point of view, the Citizen wants to have access to a certain service, but whether this service is provided by the State itself or by a private third party is a mere detail. An e-Citizen portal is capable to address a comprehensive set of services to supply most of the individual needs. This is likely to be a leveraging issue, considering that this kind of action can bring legal difficulties to overcome when started by the government.

2. Many governments have got available resources to invest in electronic government, and as demonstrated in the previously mentioned research [13], the necessary step is to divert those resources to services with more appeal to the Citizen. In democratic governments the society is supposed to be the best partner to dictate which are the priorities for the investments.

3. e-Citizen portals taken over by the organized society can constitute an outstanding instrument for leveraging the concepts of e-Democracy, considering they give the free opportunity to the individuals to participate and to have an active voice to influence the public policies and actions. No restrictions can be imposed by governments that like to listen only they want to.

4. An interesting way to carry the necessary budget to implement e-Citizen portals is the risk contract that can be proposed by organized society, with funding provided by the savings led by the new approach [13]. To convince the elected officials about these savings is a hard issue to cope with, hence the external vision and risk assumption is likely to work well in the decision making. Moreover, governments too often do not have budget enough for investing in new services, even on a perspective of short term payoff.

5. The governments can carry on focusing their investments in the construction of the back-office systems, data bases and processes in order to improve their efficiency, while organized society deploy the front-office applications based on the concept of e-Citizen portals. The existence of comprehensive back-office applications is a basic requirement to provide public services by Internet portals, and the influence of the organized society will push the government for deploying them.

6. The possibility of having a long term planning for public services on the Internet emerges as one of the major motivation for this new approach. Normally the plans are established upon the vision of the short time allocated to the mandates of the elected officials and disruptions will come true when these mandates are over.

7. A new perspective of public services providing comes true while differentiated services can be offered to different segments of society, also implying different fees to be paid for them. This feature is impossible for some kind of governments which consider that all citizens have the same rights, hence they must have the same level of services.

8. The difficulties for the required transformation to come true into the government are focused on the political goodwill and on the sluggishness of the departments supplying public services, which is motivated by the intrinsic organizational culture of the bureaucratic processes. Not always the governments find competition on the supply of services, because the individual has got no choice other then use them the way they are offered. This puts the State in a comfortable situation [9].

9. Another obstacle can be found in the political interest that the public administrators carry over when assuming the responsibility for a department or division in the complex and decentralized public administration. There is no convergence of interests to make feasible the integrations of processes and information available for the generation of services in a unified interface, motivated by the feeling of individual property associated to a political job, as well as the need of preserving the power. The personal interests are major than those corporate [12].

A coordinated effort from outside the government, far apart from the bureaucracy and personal interests of the public administrators – and based on the real demands of society – seems to be an instrument capable of breaking the inhibiting factors and this way bringing to the Citizen the same comfort they feel in their relationship with the private organizations and leveraging the practice of the democracy.

However, legal issues can become great obstacles that society and governors must overcome to allow the disclosure of information from the State to other organizations acting as new channel for public services delivery to the individuals. There is no standard proposition to overcome it so each individual country must coordinate efforts to promote research on how to eliminate the barriers according to the nature of the law on its legislation.

The search for a business model capable of overcoming the legal, political and institutional barriers and funding the operational actions for the maintenance of the e-Citizen integrated portal is a key issue to make feasible the new approach.

7 Conclusion

The proposition presented by this article breaks the paradigms in the relationship between the State and its Citizen, when suggesting that the society should organize itself to gain access to public services with the same comfort as obtained today in the private sector. It differentiates the concepts of *Electronic Government* and *Electronic*

Citizen regarding the degree of interest of each one of the parts and allocates the responsibilities of leveraging the processes to the more interested side.

Even if these concepts could suggest a rupture with the installed public power, this is absolutely not the idea, because what is proposed is merely a new way of organizing public services, over which the State still exerts total control and assumes entire responsibility. Some major issues that drive the migration for the new approach have been outlined with the aim of motivating the society actions toward the construction of e-Citizen portals.

As a result, the Citizen will be granted access to public services of their higher interest, such as Health, Education, Security and so on, with the same convenience they find when using online facilities to fulfil their duties and obligations with the State. As an additional gain, the Internet gets closer to one of its promises: to foster a higher democratic participation in the establishment of public policies.

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