

E-Governance: Need for a bottom-up approach

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Achieving success in e-governance requires active partnerships between government, citizens and the private sector

ON ITS journey to improve services for citizens, the government has undertaken several successful e-governance initiatives such as MCA21 (to improve the speed and certainty in the delivery of the services of Ministry of Company Affairs), online submission of income tax returns, Passport Seva Kendra (PSK), etc. Also, to roll out all the planned 1,100 e-governance services by 2014, the government is making huge investment — up to Rs 40,000 crore. This investment will cover the cost of all kinds of hardware and software that will be required for capacity building.

‘At your service’ or Mee Seva is Government of Andhra Pradesh’s window to its citizens. Nearly 6,000 Mee Seva Counters are servicing over 50,000 requests per day, which are geared to handle 100,000 transactions a day. It has converged all National e-Governance Programme (NeGP) initiatives in rendering G2C services in a fast and secure way — thus ended the “tyranny of ink signatures”. Back-end applications interact with database and pull

out information and front-end application receives the citizen’s request and communicates with departmental application — therefore gives a single view of the citizen. It involves departments like revenue, registration, municipal administration, education and other service delivery channels.

Reduction in cost, increase in storage, flexibility, information access from anywhere and no worries about keeping software up to date are but few considerations that encouraged Government of Maharashtra to pioneer a MahaGov Cloud. Implemented in State Data Centre, it is being used by departments for website and application hosting. Out of 42 government departments, 25 are already on the cloud that hosts 70 different applications. Using feature of thin provision of storage and memory, resources are efficiently utilized and allocated as per the requirement and performance. It is helping the SDC team to manage planned maintenance without requiring any downtime of the application, thus has increased procedural efficiencies.

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For the most part, and notwithstanding the success stories outlined above, the transition from traditional government to e-government has overlaid technology onto an existing business model—a model of disconnected silos. Policymaking, budgets, accountability, decision-making, and service delivery were all embedded within a vertically integrated delivery chain based on specific government functions. Ten years on, we have enough learnings to show that this approach simply does not work. E-governance projects should be citizen centric and not technology centric. To improve citizen services, the government needs to collaborate as the major challenge is that each department works in silos with its own infrastructure — data centres, network etc.

Citizens and businesses want greater access to government information and services, with simpler processes, less paperwork, and more efficient interactions. Citizens also expect flexible, convenient interactions, sophisticated online services, and prompt responses to their requests. Increasingly frustrated by complexity, the need to visit multiple locations, and the need to execute multiple transactions to satisfy simple requests, citizens now demand 24x7 access and rapid resolution. But the expense to provide traditional services and to extend around-the-clock availability to those services can be astronomical.

Multi-channel access (for example, web, phone, text message, and in-person) can offer constituents access through those channels that

suit their needs and preferences. Governments can also reduce costs substantially by migrating users from high-cost channels (in-person) to low-cost ones (transactional websites). Another important consideration is social inclusion. By far, the poorest and most vulnerable groups are often the greatest users of government services. But these populations are the least equipped to use technology. The ultimate goals of implementing technology solutions are to free more resources, help socially excluded groups, and to eliminate the digital divide.

While providing technology that better supports the citizen and workers is a significant step forward, there remains the challenge of connecting disparate government agencies to improve collaboration. Successful operations depend upon seamless collaboration and sharing of information and resources. This requires robust, scalable technology such as the cloud to operate effectively, as without them the best intentions can be undermined by simple breakdowns in the collaboration and communication.

Technology advances have opened up new possibilities and raised expectation about governments' role and how governments should serve communities. These factors include:

- Cloud computing as a viable ICT provisioning model and a way to reduce costs and deliver new services.
- Social media to enhance and improve levels of participation and citizen satisfaction.
- Unique identity technologies enable greater degrees of inter-agency collaboration and information sharing.

- Open data and government data stores to allow much wider access to publishing and distributing public information.

It is necessary to bring together a set of IT capabilities that genuinely provide an end-to-end solution to the government's technology needs - while also building in the interoperability and openness which is essential for the multi-vendor world in which governments operate. Getting the full benefit of the technologies and solutions requires a comprehensive programme of organizational and cultural change within the government sector, to ensure that technology is not just bolted on to old ways of working but delivers transformational impacts for citizens and businesses.

Given the quasi-federal nature of the Indian setup, Centre-State and inter-state cooperation is necessary for smooth functioning of the democratic process. This cooperation is also necessary for successful implementation of e-governance. Whether it is in e-governance, treasury operations, urban planning or rural roads connectivity, state of Madhya Pradesh has emerged as a pioneer leveraging IT in each one of them. The Directorate of Treasuries and Accounts has ensured that its 4.8 lakh employees, 4.9 lakh vendors and about 15,000 pensioners receive their payments using e-Payment system. Currently, 187 treasuries / sub-treasuries are enabled for performing e-Payment.

Mukhya Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana is an example of convergence of MGNREGS MP with other schemes like PMGSY,

where permanent assets are created. The roads are being developed in a cluster approach across 50 districts in Madhya Pradesh. Online monitoring, contractor details, expenditure and progress details are available on a real time basis. The state government has also started the scheme for recovery of bank NPA against government-sponsored employment oriented, poverty alleviation and socially desirable schemes. Recovery of bank overdues is made against Revenue Recovery Certificates filed by banks as arrears of land revenue. Web based BRISC software provides real time information on recoveries to stakeholders, i.e., Tehsil, Bank Branch, Nodal District Branch, Lead District Manager, and District Collector. Online Patwari Exam has removed manual intervention resulting in huge savings in time and improvement in efficiency. Over 100,000 candidates have applied so far, out of which 80,932 candidates were tested. The entire MIS is available online. Further, 110 of its cities are ready with City Development Plans while CDPs of 270 municipalities are being prepared. All the CDPs are available online.

The importance of adopting a bottoms-up approach cannot be emphasised enough. Reaching the last mile is an issue across all development programmes whether it is financial inclusion, delivery of health services or e-governance. In this context, one needs to speed up the e-District project, for instance. Envisaged as Mission Mode Project under the National e-Governance Plan, it is proceeding at a slow pace, in different directions and hardly qualifies for a national

endeavour. Districts are the de facto front-end of government where most government-to-consumer or G2C interaction takes place. The e-District project was conceptualised to improve this experience and enhance the efficiencies of the various departments at the district-level to enable seamless service delivery to the citizen. Front-ends under the scheme, in the form of citizen facilitation centres, are envisioned to be built at District-, Tehsil-, Sub-division- and Block-levels. Village-level front-ends would be established through Common Services Centres (CSCs) for delivery of services.

Implementation of an efficient electronic workflow system for the District Administration is at the heart of e-District. This coupled with challenging terrain such as in Assam makes it doubly difficult. Admittedly, AMTRON took up the challenge and connected ten departments in two districts – Goalpara and Sonitpur with the aim to increase accountability, efficiency and transparency in operations such that public is benefited to maximum extent possible. Citizens can now receive digitally signed documents. The format of ‘Application Forms’ has been standardized which can be used by all CSC/e-District Centres across the state. All front-end officers have been trained to deliver single window services. The system is designed to be process driven rather than champion driven.

Despite NeGP, India still lacks a full-fledged ICT framework for implementation of e-governance. Complete implementation of e-governance will include building technical hardware and software infrastructure. It will

also include better and faster connectivity options. Newer connectivity options will include faster broadband connections and faster wireless networks such as 3G and 4G. There is little argument to the fact that cellular phones based on various wireless technologies have revolutionised telecommunication in India. But these cellular technologies have not been sufficiently applied to deliver broadband data connectivity to households in rural area due to high both cost and complexity. It is now learnt that all the 250,000 Panchayats in the country will have broadband connectivity by November 2013. Till you are connected, how can one even presume to deliver e-governance.

Given that we are now in an era where technology provides much greater inter-operability than before and standards based integration is far more realistic we can look at a more structured approach going forward. Successful delivery of e-governance must by definition be led by the government itself. But private partners can help governments by providing expert technical support. IT initiatives in the government in India have largely been on a piecemeal basis characterized by a lack of vision that has limited the resultant benefits. The use of innovative public-private partnership models has been very limited and needs to be reviewed.

Worldwide, PPPs are often essential to the efficient, speedy and sustainable design and delivery of e-government services and programmes. E-government initiatives in developing countries are constrained by lack of financial

resources, low level of skills and capacity within governments, and the absence of incentive structures for rewarding performance – and the case in India seems to be no different. PPPs in e-government can help overcome many of these constraints, while at the same time increasing opportunities for the private sector.

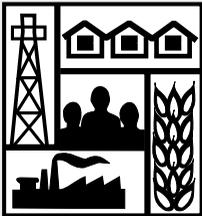
PPP can assume a wide spectrum of shapes like, BOO, BOOT (Build-Own-Operate-Transfer), BOT for specified periods -otherwise called concession contracts, joint ventures, private finance initiative (PFI), partial privatisation through partnering with strategic investor etc. The idea is to arrive at the right combination of public sector accountability with private sector efficiencies and to also to share the risk correspondingly. To mitigate risk and ensure quality and performance levels of the private sectors, it is important to set standards. The Government of India is currently working on standards management and has various drafts prepared relating to inter-operability, technical and security standards.

Experiences across the globe show that IT is one of the areas which is eminently suited for PPP – especially, in areas such as driving licenses, utility bill collections, management of land records etc. Investments in information technology by governments have an opportunity cost since there are limited resources of money, time and attention. Investing these in IT would explicitly deny such investments in other development areas like provision of water, sanitation, health, shelter, production technology and skills development. Investments in information technology have therefore to be made very strategically by governments. The Government of Andhra Pradesh, for instance, has focused its energies on creation of content and digitisation of databases so that transaction based services become attractive for private sector players. For example, in the case of the TWINS project after a successful demonstration of the pilot, private sector partners have been involved to provide services to citizens. In the case of infrastructure creation,

government has leveraged assets like land for attracting private sector investments to set up facilities like Hitec City. Similarly, the government has used the provision of a royalty free right of way for attracting investments into setting up high-speed optical fibre networks. The possible usage of such networks for e-government applications in the future has in turn enhanced their commercial viability.

Achieving success in e-governance requires active partnerships between government, citizens and the private sector. The e-governance process needs continuous input and feedback from the `customers`— the citizens, resident, businesses and officials who use electronic public services. Their voices and ideas from the grassroots are essential to making e-governance work. Hence e-governance has to be a shared vision with all the stakeholders – government and non-government – participating in defining this vision. □

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