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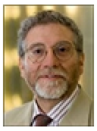
Ten years of US e-government: retrospect and prospect

Blog Editor



***Jonathan Liebenau**, head of LSE Tech, reflects on an event organized by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) held at the U.S. Capital Building as part of a series on e-government.*

The tenth anniversary of the US E-Government Act was assessed in a two-part panel discussion held with many of the leaders who helped create and shape e-government. It was interesting and informative in its own right, but I especially appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the US experience and applications elsewhere, and upon my own work on the subject, which was referred to in discussion.

USA eGov logo via Wikimedia Commons

The first panel was charged with reflecting on the politics of devising the Act and in particular the inter-departmental coordination practices that were necessary to ensure that implementation would be feasible. Although inter-agency difficulties were anticipated and encountered in other cross-cutting roles, there were, and still are, jurisdictional, incentive, conceptual and procedural problems. Leadership from the Executive Branch was important and the key role of the Office of Management and Budget was necessary to define the coordinating functions. Incentives within the bureaucracy are difficult to align, partly because the underlying advantage of e-government relatively entails lean practices while the standard mark of success for any administrator is to see their powers and responsibilities expanded, along with their staff and budgets. The discussion among panellists revealed the manner in which congenial working practices had to be devised and the importance of involving people with vision and insight into the larger goals of e-government. We were left with an uplifting image of achievement in the face of adversity, albeit requiring many years of effort.

The second panel included some who had been involved within government but whose roles in Cisco, Deloitte, Google, IBM, and VMware brought them into e-government affairs from the outside. They reflected on their personal experiences within and outside of government and especially on the opportunities and comparative experiences of the private sector and of foreign governments. A particularly interesting example of this concerned the problem of identity and the various ways in which it is solved. Different functions are often predicated on different assumptions about identity, so that for example personal services, taxation and patent filing may regard the primary identity to be the individual's role versus their address or their institution versus their personal name. Imaginative solutions are called for and the example of the Swedish government's practice of delegating identity definition to commercial banks, who can then provide a combined private sector and official electronic signature.

Getting started and addressing the majority of cases entail numerous compromises, which were discussed by many panellists. We should expect a "J"- curve of investment where savings accrue only after a period of increased expenditure, especially given the need to maintain legacy systems for a considerable length of time. There are numerous special cases that are difficult to fit into any e-government system and the ambition to be comprehensive sometimes works against getting started while the exceptions hold up implementation. Some such exceptions are to be expected, such as data and inter-linkages that affect the national security and intelligence communities, and these can just be left aside. Others, such as the anomalous payroll conditions of physicians within the Veteran's Administration hospitals, can be dealt with separately. The goal ought to be to allow the 80% of normal cases to be implemented. These practices are more clear now than ten years ago not only because of what has been learned in the interim but also because organizational and technical solutions associated with cloud computing services revel new things about what government needs to do and what it need not. Participants from the commercial side of cloud services were unsurprisingly enthusiastic about those possibilities, but they took care to acknowledge the larger goals and opportunities that face the next ten years of e-government.

The U.S. experience is different from most other nations at least because of three factors:

- the availability of knowledgeable, honest civil servants who are willing to overcome bureaucratic difficulties;
- clear, if sometimes cumbersome legal foundations and the support of the legislature;
- a private sector that recognizes the long-term opportunities that stem from cooperation in fostering the big-picture goals.

In my experience researching e-government in many parts of the world and teaching responsible civil servants some—and sometime all—of these features are missing. The U.S. e-government implementation has deserved criticism on many grounds such as design and robustness, but there is a great deal to gain from open discussions of the sort so ably organized and chaired by Robert Atkinson and the ITIF.

You can watch or listen to the event, and find related materials here.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the London School of Economics.

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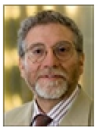
About the author



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Dr Jonathan Liebenau is a Reader in Technology Management, LSE. He Specializes in fundamental concepts of information, and the problems and prospects of ICT in economic development. Previously worked in academic administration, technology policy, and the economic history of science-based industry, all positions in which he has emphasised the use of information in organizations. He is the author or editor of a dozen books and over 70 other major publications. He has provided consultancy services to leading companies and strategic government agencies, including Dell, BT, IBM, Microsoft, TCS, Nortel, EDS, Lloyd Thompson, and in the UK Government, the Office of Science and Innovation, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Home Office.

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