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LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Governments, at all levels, are looking for ways to improve how they communicate, interact and respond to the needs of the specific communities they serve.

There is a growing public perception that governments are bureaucratic, inaccessible and inefficient. Government services are seen as fragmented, bound up in complex, often frustrating administrative processes and failing to deliver.

This combination of factors has weakened the trust between governments and people. Ample demonstration of this deterioration is provided by countless surveys of public opinion that show generalised apathy, mistrust, suspicion and even hostility towards government and its institutions among large sections of a population.

To address this fundamental problem, governments need to find ways to reach a number of clear goals.

They need to:

- Improve the access to and delivery of services
- Improve information about services
- Improve the effectiveness of government organisations and departments
- Engage with citizens to foster true collaboration.

The Internet has created the ideal space in which such interactions and communication can take place. It is a cost effective and plentiful resource. But governments need to do more than send information one way – i.e. from themselves to citizens. Perhaps the greatest potential for the Internet in government lies in the possibility of linking together the separate strands of government functions, responsibilities and services into a one-stop destination for all dealings between government and citizens.

Though e-government sounds like a vast, transformational project (and in some senses, i.e. in its ultimate form, it is), governments can take a series of small steps towards better, more efficient and citizen-centred government.

Making sure that e-mail is available throughout an organisation or department is one such obvious, but vital, step. Moving forward, online access to citizens through government portals that provide not only information but the ability to, for example, book an appointment to see an adviser, apply for an official document or register a complaint can enhance considerably a citizen's experience of interaction with government.

Above all – e-government has to be about the transformation of internal processes that lies behind the websites and other online gateways that governments provide to their citizens.

Networking is about integration. It is about creating and strengthening relationships and new forms of working that were previously impossible or very difficult to achieve. Networking creates the possibility of the vital element of successful government/citizen relationships: transparency.

So, for institutions that have operated at one remove from the communities that they serve, the changes implied by networking are not simply technological, they reach to the heart of how governments go about their business and conduct their relationships with citizens.

Challenges for Government

Moving towards a model built around the citizen

Though governments operate as separate departments, which themselves are further subdivided, this is not necessarily how the citizen sees or experiences government. One of the main challenges that governments face is how to make the business of government more accessible to its citizens. But government departments have tended to be slow to react to citizen's needs, and have developed into often cumbersome and very slow-moving bureaucracies.

The Internet provides the ability to obtain information from an almost infinite variety of sources without even having to make a phone call. Similarly, the ability to communicate instantly has transformed how millions of people work and play, so it is not surprising if there is an expectation that governments and the services they provide should operate in much the same way. Meeting their requirements means more than reproducing information that is available in paper form. Citizens expect to have services available, and be able to access different parts of government through a single, easy to navigate portal.

Managing citizen payments

Governments both receive money from and dispense money to citizens. Managing the payment and collection of money is a burdensome activity, with thousands of people employed in the collection of taxes, fines and other tariffs. Systems that both local and national governments use are expensive to run, cumbersome, inflexible and slow.

The Internet offers governments the chance to streamline payment systems, making them more user friendly and much more convenient. The success that many commercial enterprises have enjoyed shows that 'customers' readily accept the ability to pay online. With the appropriate back office systems in place, theses systems can provide significant savings.

Maximising back office efficiency and reducing cost

Supporting the functions that governments carry out for and on behalf of its citizens requires very large numbers of people. Labour intensive processes, managed on a model that has changed little in 100 years, is increasingly a burden that governments both wish and need to reduce.

Systems in use at present are rarely compatible, causing significant duplication of effort and inefficiency in administration. Identical information may be held in several sites, without any ability to use one record from different departments. This lack of coordination stops governments from moving to the much discussed 'joined-up' model that would further the cause of putting the citizen, not government departments, at the centre.

Addressing political apathy

Many countries are concerned about citizens' increasing political apathy as illustrated by low turnouts in elections, particularly at local level. Lack of participation in decision-making can lead to a lack of support for political decisions and to resistance to taxation, while elected representatives on local government lack input from their constituencies. Internet technology can help reverse this process by giving citizens another way to engage more in the processes of local government. Examples include e-enabled councillor's surgeries, on-line consultation about planning decisions and electronic voting.

Solutions

Creating multiple access points for citizens

Increasing the opportunities that citizens have to interact with governments means adopting a multichannel strategy. Communication that has previously been restricted to one or two methods (eg local governments in the UK report that 80% of their contact with citizens takes place via the telephone) can take place via the web, mobile phones, digital television, kiosks and e-mail. By creating multiple access points, citizens can begin to adopt a 'self-help' approach to a wide range of government services (local and central) and so help to create more efficient and effective government services. Communication of course means talking to a local government officer. But a multi-channel strategy also means that a significant amount of useful information and content can be made available to citizens, freeing up time that would otherwise be spent on routine enquiries.

Government portals

A scaleable, multi-access portal which allows citizens to personalize the government services they use will minimise administration and help both national and local government authorities to target their services more effectively. Self-service workflow optimisation applications in a government staff portal will allow government employees to check, monitor and collaborate on specific cases and developments. One example where Cisco has helped to achieve this is for the Belgian federal government. www.belgium.be is a federal portal whose network allows for the integration of other portals and websites from other government services. Through the use of authentication systems and mechanisms, the network can handle online transactions and is able to differentiate between different types and levels of users.

Online payment systems

Tax flows, benefit payments and other financial transactions between government and a range of stakeholders including individual citizens and businesses, can all be conducted far more efficiently and reliably through IT systems with secure payment messages flowing over electronic networks. Electronic transfers typically cost less than 10 per cent of their manual, paper-based equivalent. More flexible payment systems can also be adopted without increasing costs.

References.

Extending access in remote rural areas of Europe

In many rural areas of Europe, access to broadband infrastructure is made very difficult by the prohibitive costs of cabling. Many governments are keen to extend access to high-speed networks, but face excessively high costs in order to do so. But in one innovative solution in rural north-west Spain – an area in many ways typical of the problem – satellite technology has combined with Cisco wireless network solutions to provide broadband access to populations that otherwise may have waited years for their chance to gain the benefits of a high-speed connection to the Internet.

Combining satellite and wireless technologies represented a formidable technical challenge. But now, broadband access is beamed via satellite to an antenna, which then relays the signal through Cisco's Aironet 350 solutions to multiple destinations within the community. Broadband access is now available to local government, libraries, hospitals and schools. Eventually, access will be rolled out to small businesses and residential users in the area.

Linking up local democracy in Switzerland

The administration of the Canton of Vaud in Switzerland employs 25,000 people spread over 52 sections in 450 offices. The administration wanted to introduce a new communications system within the Canton that would link its employees and provide the basis for the introduction of more efficient working practices and automation of many routine administrative tasks. Cisco's IP telephony solution was selected as the ideal platform.

The system showed one of its great benefits when, sadly, the Parliament building in the heart of Lausanne burned down in May 2002. Employees who had their offices in the building needed to be re-housed and their communications re-established as quickly as possible. IP Telephony meant that full communications were up and running after only two days, as opposed to the weeks it would have taken to set up traditional PBX equipment.

Surrey County Council – responding to the needs of a demanding constituency

Local authority, Surrey County Council , serves one of the most affluent populations in the UK. Internet use is high, and local citizens expect to be able to manage a whole range of activities online. In response to this, Surrey has started to move towards its aim of providing all services online by 2005.

Surrey's computer and telephone networks were fragmented across a number of sites. Rather than trying to patch these together, the council decided to refresh its technology and move to a solution that could rationalise voice and data provision over a single network. Using Cisco IP Telephony, employees can take advantage of Cisco's AVVID integrated messaging that allows users to access fax, voicemail and e-mail in one place. IP Telephony also means that staff can work in different locations, but still be available on the same telephone number. This means a more 'available' service from the council for Surrey's citizens.

Hillingdon - taking the lead in London

Hillingdon Borough Council runs the second largest borough in the Greater London area. The borough is home to a quarter of a million people, who come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. Hillingdon has taken a bold approach to providing the community it serves with advanced services and is now reaping the rewards in terms of higher satisfaction and greater efficiency. One example of Hillingdon's success is the investments it has made in a web-enabled contact centre to deal with environmental issues. Users can report environmental matters to a call centre with integrated telephony, web and email. The volume of traffic through the site has soared since it went live in October 2002. But customer satisfaction has risen in tandem, from 30% before the launch to 90% today. There are plans to move other services, such as planning, into the same environment.