Unlocking E-Government Potential: Concepts, Cases and Practical Insights

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The book under review is a comprehensive work on e-Government by an author, who has the unique distinction of knowing the depth - by virtue of the position he held at IIMA as coordinator of Centre for Electronic Governance at IIMA - and breadth - by virtue of his position as e-government advisor to World Bank - of a topic, which is complex because of the challenges the government system and bureaucracy pose in adopting technology and associated changes in their way of working. Much before taking up these assignments and much before e-governance became a fashionable term to use in popular parlance, Prof. Bhatnagar showed a passion for the subject. In his early years of teaching at IIMA, he had developed several cases relating to government organizations such as primary health centres and has instilled in students a larger definition of Management Information Systems (MIS) much beyond corporate organizations. The reviewer has had first-hand experience of this knowledge dissemination as his student.

While the term e-governance is used quite frequently, we rarely hear the term e-government. At the outset, the author clarifies the distinction: governance is about processes and government is about outcomes. Governance has a broader connotation and subsumes government.

Chapter 2 discusses the status of e-government in many developing countries and most of these countries are utmost in third stage of evolution - transaction level - in e-government evolution , as referred in Gartner's evolution life cycle. The transformatory potential of e-government is not yet realized in these countries, - understandable because of late entry of government in harnessing the potential of IT; also because an integrated strategic vision is lacking in many countries including India.

The rationale for adoption of e-government is to offer better service to citizens. The author delves into this topic in detail and extensive statistics are provided on measures such as the effect of number of trips made by a citizen for a particular service, waiting time etc. That business process changes are a pre-requisite for achieving significant improvement in service delivery is demonstrated by example of land registration in Andhra and Karnataka and counter-example of Orissa.

Transparency in governance and consequent reduction in corruption are the other major reasons for e-government. While Bhoomi project in Karnataka impacted corruption significantly, interstate checkpost computerization in Gujarat and CARD in AP did not show such an impact. These cases are extensively discussed in the book.

Having discussed the concept and its benefit in the first four chapters, the author gets into the details as to how an e-government project is implemented (Chapter 5). As an idea, e-government may appeal to policy makers and bureaucrats. But when it comes to budgetary allocation, a detailed cost-benefit analysis is necessary. Many of e-government benefits are not easily monetizable. The author gives gist of economic analysis of two real life projects. Caution is provided to take cognizance of implementation risks, while computing social benefits.

E-government initiatives are still undertaken as isolated examples. There is poor information sharing. The author emphasizes the need for learning from the best practices of each of the states, In a largely populated country like India, if state level initiatives are not coordinated, there would be wasteful repetitions and it would be decades before we reap the benefits of e-government.

The author quotes Heeks that the incidence of failed

implementation is high in e-government projects, not only because they are abandoned, also because they do not deliver the desired results to the citizens. Success in e-government projects are more difficult to assess: there have been cases where a project has been deemed successful, but was later termed failure. Ministerial changes are a major risk factor in these types of projects. Either they get abandoned half-way or are unduly hastened that desired benefits are not reaped on a sustainable basis.

The author suggests public-private partnership (PPP) model for implementation of e-government projects primarily because of the needed skills within governments. The need for change in legal framework for e-government is also addressed.

The effectiveness of e-government in addressing needs of citizenry will be fully realized when the benefits reach the people in rural areas - a segment normally far removed from the benefits of governance. The author devotes one full chapter (Chapter 7) towards addressing the needs of marginalized sections of the society. The additional challenges arise out of poor infrastructure availability in rural areas. Ironically, these sections bear higher cost for access of services due to infrastructure constraints. Sometimes, ICT fails to offer the benefit for which it is designed. The author quotes an IIMA study of the Gyandoot project: Prior to Gyandoot, land records could be obtained directly from the patwari by paying 'speed money'. After the project implementation, requests could be filed electronically, but speed money had to be paid to the tehsildar for signing the land record and sometimes to the kiosk owner for printing the record! Rather than projecting a bleak outlook because of such examples, the author details a possible framework for managing viable telecentres in rural areas.

The multifarious expectations of diverse stakeholders from e-government projects make the measurement of their success challenging. Chapter 8 suggests a framework for impact assessment and explains in detail the steps of this assessment including a suggested questionnaire. Not only does the author provide the framework and for selected projects, he applies the framework, which could act as a practical guide for the professionals involved in such projects.

So much for G2C. Chapter 10 specifically addresses government to business applications in different countries and key lessons are summarized at the end. The next chapter details case studies in G2G applications. Resistance during implementation and reasons thereof are addressed as part of these case studies.

During the course of the next chapter, the author takes us into more details - guidelines for design of portal and the strategy for transition to an integrated portal.

The final chapter gives a glimpse of road ahead. The author's conclusion that technology is only 20% in e-government projects explodes the popular perception that e-government is all about technology.

The strength of the book is the structure in which a lot of the details are organized in a way that it makes easy for reading and assimilation. Through logical organization of data and facts, the author marshals a convincing case for the whys and hows of e-government. A must read for policy makers as well as practitioners.

S Ramanathan is an Engineering graduate with a post Graduate Diploma in Management from Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. He has about 35 years of experience in Manufacturing and Information Technology areas. Mr. Ramanathan is an adjunt faculty at IIM, Indore and visiting faculty at Great Lakes Institute of Management, Institute for Financial Management and Research, Bharathidasan Institute of Management and. He teaches Technology Management and IT Strategy related topics. He has offered in-house seminars for many software companies on topics such as Software Project Management, Software estimation, Requirement Analysis methodologies, OOAD and Implementation methodologies.He is a Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) and is a Certified Information Systems Auditor (CISA). He has published articles on COBIT standard and GRC (Governance, Risk and Compliance)   in international journals