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My vision for eGovernment, and how to make it real

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Potential of eGovernment: for the economy and society

I think we are all aware that the economic crisis and demographic changes are forcing Governments to rethink how they operate. At the same time hundreds of millions of citizens not only depend on public services, they also want a new and more interactive relationship with their governments. These dual pressures make it inevitable that governments must make smarter use of ICT; the real question is how and when.

Our job is to make it known that smarter spending does not have to mean getting less. ICT can actually transform and improve public services while materially reducing government debt burdens. The role of the Digital Agenda is to support this holistically by getting rid of barriers to successful eGovernment.

Indeed, within the Digital Agenda, our eGovernment objectives should be amongst the lowest-hanging fruit. I say **should** because eGovernment is one of the few policy domains where governments and civil servants are truly in control. This is about the business of governments, and their decisions determine progress in this field. Here in Belgium, Minister Van Quickenborne has shown us what happens when there is political will. Projects like the Belgian e-ID are difficult but visionary, and they only succeed when people like the Minister take the lead.

This is about more than good government. Effective and efficient public administration is the first pillar of the broader competitiveness Europe needs. We see this in the competitiveness scorecards. These scorecards consistently give top marks to countries that rank highly on public-sector openness and efficiency, and eGovernment readiness.

Across Europe the level of eGovernment readiness has increased; our Member States are frequently in the top ten globally. But is it enough? Online take-up is often still low. Sophistication remains limited. In other words, the hype of eGovernment has not always matched the reality. Europe's eGovernment lead is therefore relative.

More must be done to tap the efficiency and empowerment potential of the technologies out there. Otherwise, the untapped potential may start causing problems. Let me illustrate with two examples.

First, uncoordinated development of eProcurement platforms and e-identity systems may be creating a pointless barrier to the Digital Single Market. Business wanting to trade, to register for licences and permits, to pay VAT or establish branches across borders may experience problems. I am speaking about compliance problems and incompatible national systems. Citizens seeking to study, receive healthcare services, reside or retire in another country may find duplicated digital systems more difficult to negotiate than paper ones. This is absurd.

Both citizens and businesses must be able to benefit from on-line services everywhere in Europe regardless of their country of origin.

Secondly, if administrations are reluctant to embrace emerging technologies they risk alienating the younger generations – the digital natives. That is neither good for democracy nor for innovation in government.

If public administrations fail to keep up with the times, they risk irrelevance or even worse. They risk becoming an obstacle for competitiveness and civic engagement. They will be missing out on a massive pool of skills and talent that can help them improve the way services are designed and delivered.

Our new Action Plan for eGovernment

Today I am proud to launch an Action Plan for eGovernment which provides the framework we need for capturing the potential of the technology and the people Europe has at its disposal.

The proposition is simple: Governments that want to serve their people best, need to serve them efficiently. We must get the most out of every euro we invest.

So this Action Plan is not about incremental change, nor is it empty hype. It is practical and aimed at significantly improving the quality, stability, and effectiveness of the public sector in Europe.

In understanding the role of this Action Plan and our collective efforts in European policy, we must remember that **eGovernment is not a niche; it is the main game in public service delivery in coming years.**

This Action Plan will propose concrete measures to achieve the four political priorities of the 2009 Malmö Ministerial declaration, which are well known to all of you in this room by now.

The point I want you to take away today is that ideal eGovernment is where the users – citizens and businesses - are always at the centre, and often in the driving seat.

eGovernment is growing up to be weGovernment.

This second generation of eGovernment services and application is Europe's best chance to create a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable public sector.

Take the example of public sector information – possibly a €30 billion market in Europe. I have said it before, and I say it again: yes to open data! I want to see more citizens and businesses making use of more open – machine readable – data. By involving third parties we can both improve services and be more transparent. That would be the definition of weGov.

At this event you'll hear views from Mr Vivek Kundra, the US Government CIO. He can testify about the impact of his administration's Open.gov initiative.

Simple apps like Buitenbeter, in my own country, The Netherlands show us how it can be done. Here citizens have built an inventory of potholes and broken street lamps, for example, that allow government to more easily visit and fix. The technology and the citizen enthusiasm are the easy bit. The real challenge is in changing the mindset of public officials to catch and ride this digital wave.

It is a similar story with cloud computing services, which the US and UK governments are embracing – bringing savings up to 20% of costs. Other governments would be crazy to ignore such opportunities.

Profound impact

In urging us all to move quickly and progressively, let me acknowledge that the Commission has been a slow adopter until now. My commitment, and that of my colleague Vice President Maroš Šefčovič, is to demonstrate that we will not ask of national, regional and local authorities what we are not prepared to do ourselves. This means the Commission will:

- use eProcurement
- rationalise our web presence and ICT back office

- adopt an open data strategy, and look at setting up a portal for EU open data – to encourage others to match and beat us in the effort to open up data; and
- take steps towards going paperless.

Significantly, we will promote and help Member States develop a comprehensive policy on electronic identity management, based on the results and experiences from our ongoing large scale pilots. The whole point of the European Union is that borders should not be a barrier. But borderless access to online public services depends on being able to identify oneself digitally. When your children travel or study abroad, or you retire to a different climate, it should be conveniently and with peace of mind.

Because they provide real cross border services, these large scale pilots are really exciting. They also develop preconditions that can be reused for developing new services. If we get these Large Scale Pilots right, we will witness many other interoperability successes. Just last week I was able to see the progress at the German national IT summit in Dresden. With a German ID card one can access another government's portal – in my case it was Estonia - and access their public services.

Thanks to another pilot, soon eProcurement will work across borders, so that an Italian manufacturer will easily be able to tender for an Amsterdam municipal contract with a few clicks.

I hope we can build on the experiences of these large scale pilots. We need to match this success in new areas like eJustice and eParticipation, whilst at the same time ensuring effective follow up to the pilots I have just mentioned .

In these pilots Member States have demonstrated their willingness and ability to join forces and crack some of the hardest interoperability problems. I congratulate the Member States involved on their achievements;

And finally, I cannot wait to find on my desk the first EU-wide ICT supported petition. Enabled by the Lisbon Treaty, this has the potential to really change how the EU relates to citizens.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Europe should be the world's laboratory for innovation in the public sector. We have the talent, the imperative and the technologies. We must be very concrete. Find the real problems in our pilots and experiences and deal with them. That is the recipe for getting Every European Digital.