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Putting accessibility at the heart of e-government

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A new user-centric web-based platform, developed by EU-funded researchers, promises to bring down the barriers to accessing e-government services.

Public administrations across Europe are making the leap from government to e-government, but citizens will only reap the rewards of being able to access more services online if they are efficient, accessible and easy to use.

Developed by the 'Digital inclusive e-government' (Diego [2]) project, the platform offers a scalable, open standards-compliant solution for public administrations looking to implement e-government services from scratch or update existing ones to a more user-friendly and accessible system. The project's completion, following two years of work supported by EUR 2.5 million in funding from the European Commission, comes at a crucial time for the roll out of e-government in Europe.

On the one hand, the increasingly widespread use of mobile devices such as smart phones and tablet computers, even among the elderly and traditionally less tech-savvy citizens, is creating demand and opportunities for more inclusive online services accessible anytime, anywhere. On the other hand, public administrations are increasingly coming to realise that in many cases the e-government services they have deployed in recent years, often at substantial cost, do not meet citizens' needs or are not easily accessible to inexperienced users. And, as European Commission Vice-President Neelie Kroes, recently pointed out such systems have often been developed in isolation, creating digital borders between towns, regions and countries where physical boundaries have long disappeared (1).

'Over the last five to 10 years, public administrations of all sizes have spent millions on e-government services but often they weren't planned or designed very well. The result is people don't use them,

and in many cases penetration is as low as 10 or 15 %,' explains Alejandro Echeverría, marketing director at IDI EIKON in Spain, the Diego coordinating partner.

Inclusive e-government

The Diego platform aims to overcome that problem. It is designed with user-friendliness firmly in mind, allowing anyone, regardless of their level of digital literacy, to access online services through an adaptable and intuitive interface. And, as a web-based standards-compliant system, it is accessible from any device, including smart phones, televisions and digital kiosks in public locations.

For administrations, implementing the Diego system is cost-effective and relatively straightforward, even in cases where they have legacy e-government systems that need to be updated or transferred.

'The basic framework for the system is the same for all applications and the use of open standards, and its provision as software-as-a-service, helps overcome interoperability issues. However, some services need to be tailored specifically to the requirements of individual administrations. For example, data protection and data management laws are different in every country, so how data is stored and accessed, whether locally or using cloud resources, varies in each case,' Mr Echeverría explains.

The differences were underscored in seven pilot deployments of the Diego platform involving public administrations in Cyprus, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. In each case a variety of different e-services were developed or migrated onto the Diego system. In the trials, citizens could access a range of e-government services: they could arrange appointments with local councillors, find out about training courses, renew their ID cards or look for jobs. End users, including less experienced elderly citizens, generally found the system easy to use, and appreciated the range of services on offer.

'One key focus of the pilots in Spain was employment services - understandably, given the high unemployment rate here at present. Job searches used to be handled at the regional level, but they are now being offered at the local level, and in most cases the systems used to provide access weren't very efficient or accessible. With the Diego system we have been able to interconnect job databases, connecting with private job search engines and the EURES European portal, providing citizens with better access and enabling them to upload their CVs and apply for jobs online,' Mr Echeverría says.

Saving time and cutting costs

For administrations, the costs of implementing the system are relatively low: it costs around EUR 150 per month to use the Diego platform in a town of 10,000 to 15,000 people and, depending on specific requirements, it takes just one or two months to set up.

The system is continuing to be used at many of the pilot sites, and IDI EIKON, in collaboration with other project partners, is looking to deploy it with other public administrations across Europe in the future. Among other possible uses, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is looking at the system to open communications channels and enhance social and cultural interaction between communities in north and south Cyprus. In addition, Mr Echeverría points out that the platform, being 100 %web-based 'fits perfectly' into the European Commission's recently launched strategy to drive business and government productivity via cloud computing.

Mr Echeverría notes, however, that uptake of the platform is dependent on several factors, not least

the will of politicians and other stakeholders to implement e-government services or update existing ones. In addition, the economic crisis and the scaling back of public budgets across Europe also represent a challenge, despite the mid to long-term benefits of e-government.

'Ultimately, stakeholders need to realise that e-government saves everyone time and money. If citizens can complete procedures online, they don't need to go to public administration offices, queue up, and occupy the time of a government official. It's hard to quantify the cost savings, but it's realistic to think that a procedure that may cost a couple of euros to complete in the traditional way will only cost a couple of cents if it is done digitally,' Mr Echeverría explains.

In addition, the Diego researchers found that by introducing users, some of whom had little or no ICT experience, to the platform, the same people went on to access other services online.

'After using the system, some elderly people went on to set up Twitter or Facebook accounts to communicate with friends and family,' Mr Echeverría explains. 'We like to see the platform as a training bicycle, in which access to e-services are the support wheels that help people get on their way in the online world - it's a big step forward to e-inclusion.'

It is also an important leap toward more widespread and effective e-government in Europe. As Neelie Kroes has noted: 'Dealing with government services can be trying or time-consuming. First and foremost, governments should put users in control, and in the centre. I want citizens to benefit from services they really want to use, services targeted to their needs, services that are smooth and seamless.' (2)

The Diego platform sets an important example for how that can be achieved.

Diego received research funding under the European Union's Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP).

Link to project on CORDIS:
- FP7 on CORDIS [3]
- Diego project factsheet [4]

Link to project's website:
- 'Digital inclusive e-government' website [2]

Links to related news and/or articles:
- 1 and 2 Speech: 'Build, Connect, Grow': The road towards borderless eGovernment. Sixth Ministerial eGovernment Conference, Poznan Poland, 17 November 2011 [5]

Other links: European Commission's Digital Agenda website [6]

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