Digital Single Market

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Features Digest: Going from e- to we-government

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Europe has laid out an ambitious plan to unlock the full potential of information and communications technology (ICT) in meeting public demand for smarter, joined-up government e-services. Bold actions boosted by Large-Scale Pilot projects aim to deliver on e-government's promise.

[1]

The internet has won over consumers but faced with interoperability problems between services and administrations, as well as between countries, many Europeans remain excluded by the e-government experience to date.

Many EU countries rank among the top 10 in e-government readiness, but take-up is still considered low. Those services that are available often lack sophistication and appeal, according to experts, especially to 'digital natives' - the generation that grew up with the internet.

'In other words, the hype of e-government has not always matched the reality. Europe's eGovernment lead is therefore relative,' commented Neelie Kroes, Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for the Digital Agenda, at the launch of an EU-backed Action Plan for eGovernment in 2010.

The plan is not about incremental change or empty promises, suggested Mrs Kroes, but about practical and ambitious steps to boost the quality, stability and effectiveness of the public sector in Europe.

Faced with tough economic choices and the complex social dynamics in Europe today, more than ever, citizens need simple and smart ways to interact with their governments. 'ICT can actually transform and improve public services while materially reducing government debt burdens,' noted

Mrs Kroes. And the Digital Agenda seeks to tear down the barriers blocking second-generation e-government services.

To meet the growing and changing demands of citizens, governments must listen to their needs, and this is where Web 2.0 and social media are building on first-generation e-government offerings, leading to a new 'we-government' paradigm.

Talk large, act larger

The Commission is not just talking the talk with its Action Plan for eGovernment and Digital Agenda, it is also walking the walk. 'If public administrations fail to keep up with the times, they risk irrelevance or even worse,' commented Commissioner Kroes, '...becoming an obstacle for competitiveness and civic engagement.' The goal is to harness the contributions of the millions of switched-on citizens, 'a massive pool of skills and talent' that can help administrations improve the way services are designed and delivered.

For its part, the Commission will redouble its use of e-procurement, clean up its web presence, adopt a more 'open data' approach, and move towards paperless administration where possible, according to a statement.

The Commission is also funding a raft of innovative projects, including Large-Scale Pilots funded by the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP), to lay the groundwork for further e-government progress. For example, pilots that help governments develop services which make moving, say, to other Member States or tendering for contracts across borders much simpler.

'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,' said Commissioner Kroes, as well as to overcome interoperability problems facing administrations both in and between Member States.

Sun, sea ...sickness?

The 'Smart open services for European patients' [2] (epSOS) pilot project is making it easier for people to receive medical assistance anywhere in the EU by removing linguistic, administrative and technical obstacles. Two new services - ePrescriptions and Patient Summaries - are currently moving into a live piloting phase. And by 2012, 30,000 professionals will be using the system, according to the project's coordinator Fredrik Linden of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR). The challenge, he says, is to scale up the solutions. Some are already being picked up by global standardisation organisations, and the project is working with the US to head off competing standards.

Another Large-Scale Pilot, the 'Secure identity across borders linked' [3] (STORK) project, is putting in place a system for cross-border electronic identity management (eIDM) and authentication. This means businesses, citizens and government employees will be able to use their national electronic identity cards to access relevant public services in any Member State. To achieve this, 19 Member States are working together with the private sector to implement a reference architecture for connecting different countries' eID systems in an interoperable way.

'The end goal of the project is to make EU citizens' lives easier by providing secure ways of accessing public electronic services in other Member States,' says Miguel Álvarez Rodríguez, director of the STORK project.

Meanwhile, the 'Pan-European public eProcurement on-line' [4] (PEPPOL) pilot's vision is that any company, large or small and in any sector, can communicate electronically with any European

government institution throughout the whole procurement chain. For example, through simple online forms and re-usable data, a Portuguese SME can submit a tender for a municipal procurement contract in Milan. The project developed solutions for e-signatures, e-ordering, e-cataloguing and e-invoicing throughout the contract cycle.

'The harmonisation of e-signatures has been one of our biggest successes,' says Andre Hoddevik, PEPPOL's project director. 'At the start of the project we hoped to have 25-30% of certifying authorities accepted for foreign suppliers, but [today] we cover 100% of the trusted services list and even some outside that list, including in Russia.'

Simple steps, cross-border

It is also here that the 'Simple procedures online for cross-border services' [5] (SPOCS) pilot weighs in. With outputs from PEPPOL and STORK, SPOCS is working to remove the administrative barriers that European businesses face before offering their services abroad. The project helps entrepreneurs set up or expand businesses in other Member States. It has developed a platform that smoothes access to the Single Points of Contact set up to assist businesses in dealing with administrative burdens in cross-border commerce.

Where SPOCS perhaps stops, the 'eJustice communication via online data exchange' [6] (e-CODEX) takes the baton. Mobility - of people and business - within the EU is on the rise, making relationships and cooperation between different national judicial systems more complex. The e-CODEX project is tackling this 'complexity' with smarter, streamlined use of new ICTs which help citizens, companies, administrations, and legal professionals cope with new situations requiring redress. This means faster resolutions to disputes and smoother cross-border transactions, while at the same time improving Europe's competitiveness.

If you buy a bicycle online from another European country and the seller does not deliver, e-CODEX's tools will help you make a claim against the seller. 'Not by visiting various agencies (and filling in various forms) but just by sitting at your computer and all in your own language,' notes the project's coordinator Carsten Schmidt. Governments can also use e-CODEX to collect fines, he continues. 'Speeding in another EU country? You will receive that speeding ticket from your own country!'

Towards a Digital Single Market

Together with progress being made by STORK, PEPPOL and SPOCS, e-CODEX is helping to break down the barriers to the Digital Single Market.

'Both citizens and businesses must be able to benefit from online services everywhere in Europe regarless of their country of origin,' stressed Mrs Kroes. Indeed, Europe has all the ingredients - diverse cultures, languages and procedures - to be the world's laboratory for e-government innovation, suggested Mrs Kroes. Concrete applications are needed that meet the demands of today's more sophisticated and demanding technology users. The Large-Scale Pilots pave the way for concrete results.

'Find the real problems in our pilots ... and deal with them,' challenged the Commissioner at the launch of the Action Plan. 'That is the recipe for getting Every European Digital'.

Note: CORDIS Features produces a series of 'Digests' to introduce or develop on interesting themes, from country spotlights to specific or emerging technologies and trends, from regional activities to socially or scientifically significant developments.

Useful Links

- [epSOS](http://www.epsos.eu) [2]
- [STORK](http://www.eid-stork.eu) [3]
- [PEPPOL](http://www.peppol.eu) [4]
- [SPOCS](http://www.eu-spocs.eu) [5]
- [e-CODEX](http://www.ecodex.eu) [6]
- [eGovernment Large-Scale Pilots](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/ict_psp/projects/index_en.htm) [7]
- [CIP](http://ec.europa.eu/cip) [8]

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