Making the “enlarged Europe” more connected and more competitive: e-government as a priority of the Italian Presidency of the EU

By Lucio Stanca, Italian Minister for Innovation and Technologies

E-government is becoming the main cornerstone of the ongoing process of modernization in Italy and, at the same time, a high level priority for the Italian Presidency of the European Union.

On the agenda of the Italian leadership, e-government stands out as a fundamental element of a more complex and broad innovation strategy. The Italian Government shares the vision that the achievement of the Lisbon strategy objectives is directly connected to the realization of an effective e-government in the whole of Europe. On this basis we are convinced of the need to review and update the Brussels Ministerial Declaration and to give priorities and concrete indications on specific actions to undertake in the implementation of e-government in the framework of the eEurope 2005 Action Plan.

The European Commission fully supports the Italian commitment to re-launch the e-Europe plan indicating e-government – together with development of Broadband connection, e-Health, e-Business and e-Learning – among the new strategic growth and competitiveness factors at a world level.

In this perspective, the European Ministerial eGovernment Conference 2003 – scheduled in Cernobbio Villa Erba on July 7-8 and jointly organized by the Italian Government and by the Commission – will be the first great event of the Italian Presidency of the EU. Ministers responsible for e-government from some 40 countries – 15 Union Members, 10 future Members and a number of important extra European countries – will provide above all a real evidence that an “enlarged Europe” is going to work hard and together on a complex and fascinating agenda for its future.

In Como we will discuss how technology can help provide more inclusive and personalised services and increase the productivity and accountability of public administrations, creating a better relationship between both Public Administrations and their citizens and Public Administration and business. We also will focus on the role of e-government to improve the quality of life of the European citizens in terms of providing innovative models to overcome exclusion due to differences in capabilities, skills,
income and gender. E-government is also an important instrument to reduce financial waste, fight corruption and thus to increase attractiveness for investment.

In a more connected and enlarged Europe e-government is going to play a leading role in giving a better and more profound information about policy decision and encouraging an active participation in the policy making process and in the evaluation of the decisions taken. In this perspective, e-Democracy could become a reality for the next few years and represent a challenge and an opportunity for old and new Member Countries.

In Como international business and academia from the ICT sector will be represented at the highest level, which testifies how much European and American enterprises and academia perceive as strategic the themes discussed on this occasion. In fact we consider the European eGovernment Conference 2003 a fundamental instrument to revive European competitiveness and stress Europe’s determination to pursue the eEurope 2005 Action Plan, a programme aiming at evaluating e-government experiences better by promoting a number of best practices. In this perspective the 65 best practices - 13 of which are Italian - selected by the Commission will provide evidence of the changes that public administrations need to make in their own organisation and in employees skills in order for e-government to deliver its full potential. The 13 selected Italian best practices are tangible evidence of the efforts of central and local authorities in Italy to meet, in an innovative way, the needs of citizens and enterprises.

An exhibition within the conference centre will illustrate to the 1,000 expected participants examples of the best practices being implemented today in Europe. Exhibits were selected by a panel of independent experts from 357 applications received. Municipal, regional and national administrations from 14 Member States, from 12 Accession Countries, as well as from Switzerland, Norway and Iceland responded to the call.

The conference will culminate with a final Ministerial declaration that will stress the substantial progress made before and during the Conference and show the way forward in the implementation of the e-government strategy at European level outlined in the eEurope 2005 Action Plan.

We will share, during the Conference and the Ministerial meeting of e-government Ministers that will take place the 8th of July, with our European partners the idea that the development of e-government requires a shared vision of public sector innovation, a major interoperability of public administrations information systems, a major coordination between central and local administrations, an exchange of experiences to assess the feasibility of emerging solutions for identification, security and privacy, and the recognition of the importance of research and development into multi-platform access.

We will discuss at creating pan-European e-government services and a system of portals: in this case many of the policy areas with a European dimension and directly involving citizens or companies - Internal market, consumer rights, social protection research and development and others – could benefit from pan-European online services.

All these are ambitious objectives but we are convinced that the challenge is fascinating: we all have to work hard to make e-government the fundamental driver for innovation and a milestone in areas such as digital alphabetisation, competitiveness in a knowledge economy, and digital infrastructures.

From BundOnline to DeutschlandOnline

By Dr. Göttrik Wewer, State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Germany

A new partnership for e-government is emerging in Germany between the federal government, the states and local authorities.

E-government in Germany is tied to the achievement of many different goals of the Federal Government. It is the motor for administrative reform, which sets the pace for the administration’s client services. It is one of the pillars supporting Germany’s economic competitiveness. Electronic services reduce bureaucratic burdens for business, especially smaller and medium-sized enterprises. And e-government is a milestone on Germany’s way to becoming an information society. The high number of online-service users proves that Germany’s e-government is on the right path.

► BundOnline 2005

In September 2000 Chancellor Gerhard Schröder put e-government on the priority list of Germany’s Federal Government (Bund) by launching the initiative BundOnline 2005.

The aim of BundOnline 2005 is to put around 400 selected services of the federal administration online by the year 2005. The implementation plan shows all those services that the federal administration is putting on the Internet for private citizens, the business and academic communities and other sections of administration. Each service is being launched online according to a precise schedule. The process is making good progress, and major successes have been achieved in the meantime.

Today, already half of the required services are available online. By the end of 2005, all of them will be on the net. For this effort, we are spending 1.45 thousand million euros - an investment that enjoys national and international reputation and which will bring considerable returns in future. For example, BAVÖG online, the electronic system for student loan repayments, already led to savings of 4.5 million euros in the first year of its operation. Besides financial aspects, online services will reduce bureaucratic burdens and speed up administrative processing. This will benefit citizens and the economy.

The overriding philosophy of BundOnline 2005 is one that is oriented as closely as possible towards client services. The Federal Government aims to provide low-cost, efficient and convenient services for its clients, which mainly come from business and industry. Therefore, it is especially important to reduce bureaucratic hurdles and to streamline administrative processes, which will benefit smaller and medium-sized enterprises in particular.

Examples for this can be found in the areas of taxes, statistics, customs and procurement.
Most of businesses’ reporting and tax-related obligations can be fulfilled via the Internet – easier, faster and cheaper.

Over 14,000 businesses that have to register now send their data for internal European trade statistics to the Federal Statistical Office via the Internet. Participants in the EU’s Ministerial eGovernment Conference 2003 in Italy on July 7 and 8 will have the opportunity to learn more about this application, called w3stat, which has been selected for exhibition at the conference.

Making customs declarations can be done a lot faster with the help of e-government. For example, ships entering the port of Hamburg will soon be able to submit their customs declarations whilst still at sea. Upon docking, the crew will be handed the completed documents. Shipping companies will also be sent their tax assessments electronically.

Another example is “Öffentlicher Eink@uf Online” (public procurement online). The Federal Government has developed an online solution for the awarding of contracts. With the help of electronic signature and codation, the online awards processes comply with the law. This e-solution offers great potential benefits for all involved. Several studies estimate that the public sector can save 5 - 10% of its overall procurement budget. This means around 12 to 25 thousand million euros can be saved at all levels of administration. The Bund offers this public procurement platform to federal states and local authorities. Many states and authorities, as well as other EU countries have already indicated their interest.

DeutschlandOnline

Good e-government demands the extensive integration and optimisation of administrative processes – at each individual level of administration and between the different levels. This is a real challenge, given the enormous variety of an IT landscape that includes the federal government and its agencies, 16 federal states, more than 300 regional districts and well over 13,000 local governments in Germany.

Although the services provided by BundOnline 2005 have repeatedly received good ratings, there is still a real need for further integration of services offered at the state and local levels. Different agencies are duplicating their efforts, each developing comparable applications on their own. Dozens of different software applications are being used to process the roughly 4 million residence registrations, and the same is true of 15 million automobile registrations. Electronic processing without discontinuities of media between the federal, state and local levels are still the exception rather than the rule.

Private citizens and businesses are less concerned about which level of government is providing which service for them on the Internet; what counts is that the services are provided online and that they are modern, efficient and inexpensive. Germany has to combine and utilise the modernising and financial potential of e-government at all levels of government.

The Federal Government wants to share the success of its initiative with the federal, state and local authorities. Therefore, the updated version of the implementation plan for BundOnline 2005, which was approved by the Federal Cabinet in December 2002, focuses on the joint e-government policies at the federal, state and local levels. With this in mind, Federal Minister of the Interior Otto Schily offered an e-government partnership to federal states and local authorities at the CeBIT trade fair in Hanover in March this year. The aim is a joint strategy called DeutschlandOnline. This strategy will enable all levels of administration to identify best practice projects, to avoid duplicating projects, to design the projects in an interoperable manner and by doing so make them accessible to an even larger number of users.

The joint use of so-called “Einige für Alle Dienstleistungen” (services developed by a few for use by the whole administration) like the procurement platform “Öffentlicher Eink@uf Online” mentioned above is only one example within a wider range of possible projects. The DeutschlandOnline strategy can save money and modernise the entire administration at all government levels.

At the moment, the Federal Government, the federal states and local authorities are discussing details for the formulation of the new joint strategy. A working group in the Federal Ministry of the Interior supports the discussion, collates the results and sets the basis for specific project partnerships between members of different levels.

I am confident that with this strategy Germany will overcome some of the organisational problems an administration based on federal principles has to cope with in terms of implementing e-government. A comprehensive e-government strategy as it is designed now in Germany provides the capacity to foster cross-border online services and to enrich the e-government discussion all over Europe.

The Danish official digital signature: an alternative to electronic ID cards?

The Danish government has adopted a pragmatic but nevertheless original approach to the issue of user identification and authentication that could be of interest to other European governments.

Any government engaged in a programme to deliver public services electronically is rapidly confronted with the crucial issue of user identification and authentication. Finding a way of verifying the identity of users is essential for building trust and driving take-up of online services and transactions. The first attempts to create a digital identity for users of e-government services have been based on Personal Identification Numbers (PIN) and passwords, but they have rapidly reached their limits. PIN-code solutions are indeed perceived as costly and insufficient for full electronic transactions in a multi-organisational 24x7 environment, especially for e-government services where higher-level security, authentication and non-repudiation are required.

The real technical solution for secure user identification and authentication has been known for several years: it is the digital signature, a piece of software that identifies individual users and makes it possible to authenticate them through...
a certification scheme based on a Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) and the services of trusted third parties. But so far the implementation of digital signatures has been much slower than expected for a number of reasons, such as the lack of information and of confidence of potential users, the complexity of the process to obtain a signature, or the cost for the user of obtaining and maintaining the signature. The main barriers are the lack of services on offer that require digital signatures, service providers, who are wary of deploying such services when so few people have digital signatures, and service users, who avoid acquiring a signature when so few services require it.

To cut through the barriers and overcome the deadlock of demand waiting for supply and supply waiting for demand, many European governments have decided to kick-start the market by issuing digital signatures to their citizens themselves. Most of them have chosen a hardware-based solution, consisting in embedding the digital signature in a smart card (either a mandatory electronic ID card or a voluntary ‘entitlement’ card). Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Finland and Italy have already started issuing such cards, and other countries are planning or envisaging to do so, including France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. But these solutions are expensive, as they require huge investments by both government and users in hardware like smart cards and smart-card readers. Furthermore, they can meet significant resistance as electronic ID cards usually contain a wealth of personal data and information beside the digital signature.

Denmark has made a strategic choice that is different to most of its European neighbours. It has decided to issue citizens with free, software-based, ‘official’ digital signatures, distributed through many suppliers. The aim is to enable all Danes to conduct their business with public authorities securely from their home computers, using the same identification system for all public e-services but without having to pay any additional charge for proving their identity or having to carry potentially intrusive electronic ID cards. This solution is expected to achieve a wider availability and uptake of signatures, which in return will accelerate the rollout of new services.

The Danish approach is based on pragmatic technical and economic choices. Technically speaking, Denmark has adopted “good enough” rather than “best” practices. Its software-based digital signature is not the most secure or flexible form available, but it is expected to achieve widespread uptake more rapidly than ‘best of breed’ solutions. Experience indeed shows that the best technical solutions often present too many barriers. For example, a full-fledged technically secure digital signature system would require people to show up in person to prove their identity, which would represent a key barrier to wide adoption. In the same way, a fully flexible solution would enable users to communicate securely from any device (PC, PDA, mobile phone) by activating a private key stored on a remote server, but this would be seen by many as a potential threat to the privacy of sensitive data and would therefore limit uptake of the signature. On the contrary, the solution chosen by the Danish government is an Internet-based solution whereby the user downloads and installs a decentralised certificate on his or her own PC. For the user, the signature is therefore nothing more than a highly secured computer program, easy to install and to use.

Pragmatism also led to adopting a solution based on an open standard that was developed following extensive consultations and in accordance with international specifications. This open standard is meant to ensure the development of interoperable digital signatures and time-stamping services, working over different platforms.

In principle, the choice of an open standard enables any provider to build and supply its own products and services. However, there is no expectation that this will happen immediately, and the Danish government has therefore decided to stimulate adoption through an innovative public-private partnership. In February 2003, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation entered into a four-year contract with telecommunication company TDC to deliver the basic digital signature technology for citizens, companies and public entities. TDC’s role is to facilitate rollout by identifying major public and private sector organisations that will use the system for their e-services, and by issuing the signatures to interested citizens and businesses. Its formal agreement is to reach 350,000 users during the first year, 700,000 after two years, 1 million after three years and 1.3 million after four years. It is expected that the scheme will ultimately provide all Danes with digital signatures.

The government plans to support the rollout with approximately 40 million Danish Krones, (EUR 5.4 million), but one third of TDC’s “seed money” will be withheld if rollout targets are not met. The supplier’s incentive is therefore not so much about earning money on the contract itself, but about stimulating public and private sector uptake of a digital signature solution that can open up for a new wave of development of online services – including its own. The signature will be free of charge for citizens and public authorities to obtain and use. Private businesses will have to pay a price to obtain the signatures, but will subsequently be able to use it for free when contacting public sector organisations.

The Customs and Tax Administration has been the first organisation to use the new official digital signature for its online services. During this year’s tax-filing season, Danish taxpayers have been offered the possibility to use either PIN-code or digital signature solutions to complete, correct, approve and submit their tax returns over the Internet. Some 6,200 out of 394,000 returns submitted online were done so using the official digital signature, representing one in four citizens already in possession of a digital signature. The government considers this figure as satisfactory and encouraging, especially as the solution chosen will make it possible for citizens to provide and receive tax-related information all year round.

Further potential service providers include a number of other entities in central government, particularly those delivering services to businesses, but also many municipalities that are eager to demonstrate rapid service improvements to their citizens. It is also expected that private companies such as banks, insurance and pension companies will quickly start using the official digital signature so that the market grows in the public and private sector at the same time.

With the deployment of its ‘official’ digital signature, the Danish Government has opted for a pragmatic and cost-effective approach to solving the issue of user identification, designed to help kick-start the market while enabling technical and other adjustments to be made along the way. It is still too early to say whether Danish citizens and businesses will effectively adopt the system. It is also too early to say whether this solution represents a viable alternative to the deployment of an electronic ID card, especially as card-based schemes have wider objectives than just securing access to e-government services. But it has already spared the Danish government much of the political controversy that surrounds the e-ID schemes launched by some of its European partners.

http://www.digitalsignatur.dk/
Spain’s new visual image for its e-administration drive demonstrates how e-government can help to foster the adoption of marketing and branding techniques in the public sector.

The Spanish Ministry of Public Administration recently decided to give a new promotional image to the country’s e-government drive. This promotional image, consisting in a new logo that will have to be used by all public bodies engaged in delivering public services electronically, will become an element of identification for all e-government activities, projects and measures in Spain’s central administrations.

The logo features the words ‘Administración Electrónica’ (Electronic Administration) in a way that is meant to evoke commitment and dynamism. The Ministry of Public Administration has published a manual explaining when and how this logo should be used.

The decision to create this logo serves a triple objective: to symbolize a renewed political commitment to e-government, to foster a sense of common drive for government departments and other public bodies involved in the delivery of e-services to citizens and businesses. So far, Spanish e-government has often been perceived as lacking consistency and unity, with some leading-edge services (particularly in the area of tax administration and social security) but little government-wide visibility. Using the new logo will help departments implementing e-services feel like they are part of a wider drive and create a sense of common undertaking.

Finally, the new logo will provide citizens and businesses with a way of identifying e-government services easily. Being common to all electronic public services, it will engender trust and confidence, and help users to become familiar with e-government. Ultimately, it will contribute to fulfilling the main purpose of e-government branding and marketing: increase acceptance and stimulate use of e-services.

Indeed, online public services only deliver their full benefits if people use them, which requires that they know about them and can identify them easily. The Spanish government, like most of its European partners, has decided to stimulate demand by communicating and marketing e-services more actively, with the dual goal of raising awareness and building trust.

Spain’s new image for ‘Administración Electrónica’ is a good example of how the imperatives and technicalities of marketing and branding are gaining ground in the public sector thanks to e-government. Of course, marketing and communicating e-government involves a number of other elements besides a logo: domain name promotion, website promotion, common ‘look and feel’ standards for websites, consistent and effective use of e-mail for interacting with citizens, e-mail newsletters, press releases, online forums, information and education campaigns, monitoring and analysis of users’ satisfaction and responses, etc. However, the definition and promotion of a new visual image can constitute the starting point of the development of a full e-government Marketing Plan, including a mix of online and offline marketing strategy, and covering all aspects of the communication on the existence and benefits of e-services, from audience targeting to results measurement and processes for strategy update. In this area as in many other aspects of e-government, the exchange of experience and good practices between European governments can help to foster effectiveness and return on investment.

The state of e-government in the accession countries Part 2

Following on from Part 1 of our summary on the state of e-government in the accession countries in March, we take a look at the progress made by three more future EU Member States.

E-government in Estonia

Estonia is widely seen as one of the most advanced countries in terms of ICT and e-government development, not only among the EU accession countries but also in Europe as a whole. A number of spectacular achievements and the apparent easiness with which this Baltic Republic has adopted new technologies have impressed many observers worldwide. This has been achieved thanks to a strategy developed over the last seven years, which has included the adoption of a sound legal framework, the building of a national infrastructure, and the modernisation of back-office systems.

The Department of State Information Systems (RISO), part of the Ministry of Transport and Communications, is the body responsible for devising and driving the implementation of the overall Estonian information society strategy, including e-government.

The legal framework that has been created includes the Personal Data Protection Act (1998), the Databases Act (1997), the Digital Signature Act (2000), and the Public Information Act (2001). This has been developed in tandem with a national infrastructure centred on a government backbone network, called EEBone, launched in 1998. It connects all government offices across the country and provides them with secure access to the Internet and to the government’s Intranet. The development of local networks has also been
encouraged, coordinated and supported centrally, enabling all 247 local authorities to have access to the Internet since 2000.

The government made early efforts to modernise its back-office systems with, in particular, a programme to modernise and integrate its databases and registers. This project, branded ‘X-Road’, aims to develop software, hardware and organisational methods for standardised use of, and access to, national databases. At the same time, a document management programme is being implemented, with a view to improve and standardise electronic document management within public administrations. Thanks to this work on back office systems, the Estonian government has been able to build the front-end blocks of its national e-government infrastructure, including an e-government portal for citizens (the ‘Citizen IT Centre’, inaugurated in March 2003) and an e-democracy website (branded ‘Today, I decide’). It has also been one of the first European countries to introduce electronic identity cards as a tool to secure access to e-government services. A total of 228,000 ID cards had been issued by May 2003.

As a result of these efforts, a number of electronic services are already available to Estonian citizens, some of them very successful such as the online tax filing applications provided as part of the e-TaxBoard programme. Widely seen as an e-government champion, Estonia recently embarked on a project to help its neighbours achieve similar success by creating an e-Governance Academy to train civil servants and policy makers of other Central and Eastern European countries, as well as countries from the former Soviet Union and Asia.

Further information:
The Department of State Information Systems: www.riso.ee
The Estonian Informatics Centre www.ria.ee
The Estonian e-Government portal (Citizen IT Center): www.eesti.ee
The Estonian electronic ID card website www.id.ee
The Estonian E-governance Academy www.ega.ee

E-government in Latvia

Latvia’s information society strategy is coordinated by the Department of Information Technology at the Ministry of Transport and Communication. This department is notably in charge of driving forward the implementation of the Latvian e-government ‘concept’ (strategy) adopted in September 2002. Nevertheless, at an operational level, part of the e-government drive is conducted by the State Information Network Agency (VITA).

In the last few years, the country has adopted a package of legislation that includes the Law on Accessibility of Information (1998), the Law on Data Protection (2000), the Law on State Information Systems (2002), and the Law on Electronic Documents and Digital Signatures (2002). This has paved the way for the creation of an e-government infrastructure made up of a data network called State Significance Data Transmission Network which connects most government institutions. An e-government portal, LVonline.lv, has also been launched, providing a single access to government information and services.

In September 2001, the Latvian Government approved a “Concept on Identity Cards”, aimed at introducing new personal identity documents (national identity cards). Guidelines for the concrete implementation of ID cards and electronic signatures, as well as for other short-term actions, are included in an “E-government Functional Model” issued in 2002 by the Ministry of Transport and Communication.

The Latvian government has devoted most of its early ICT efforts to the establishment of sound back-office systems (in the form of new and accurate registers for private persons, enterprises, (land) property, planning, vehicle property, etc.) and networking capabilities (for the wider public sector, including education institutions, libraries, and social security institutions). It is now working on the implementation of a number of electronic services, including the registration of residents and of companies, and the submission of commercial forms.

Further information:
Department of Information Technology at the Ministry of Transport and Communication
www.sam.gov.lv/branches/informatics/
State Information Network Agency (VITA) www.vita.gov.lv

E-government in Lithuania

The political responsibility for the development of the information society in Lithuania lies with the Information Society Development Committee (IVPK), which was set up in mid-2001 and is headed by the Prime Minister.

A relatively well-developed legal framework is in place to support the development of e-government, including the Law on Legal Protection of Personal Data (1996) and the Law on Electronic Signature (2000). In April 2002, the Ministry of Economy also approved regulations regarding some information society services, in particular electronic commerce.

The Lithuanian e-government infrastructure is still under development. The ‘E-government Concept’ (strategy) that was approved by the Government on 31 December 2002, provides for the development and implementation of a Secure Public Institutions Network, which will link all government bodies. In addition, the ‘Concept’ lays down guidelines for the development of a multi-channel platform ensuring the widest possible access to e-services. A transaction engine and an identification and authentication system are foreseen. An expert commission has been set up to develop a strategy for electronic identification for citizens and businesses, which is likely to include the development of an electronic ID card containing personal data, social insurance details and medical records.

To date, the Lithuanian government has given priority to infrastructure and back-office projects, with specific efforts dedicated to creating an integrated system of state registers. In particular, the integration of the tax inspection and social security registers is due to be finalised soon. This ‘E-government Concept’ now foresees more efforts for the development of electronic services to citizens and businesses, with an ambitious aim of bringing online by 2005 all public services capable of e-delivery.

Further information:
Information Society Development Committee: www.ivpk.lt
Department of Information Policy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs http://www.vrm.lt/nuorodos/ipd/ipd.htm

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For all those looking for information on educational opportunities in Europe, help is at hand. A portal has been launched this Spring that provides access to existing information resources on learning and training openings across Europe. Called PLOTEUS or www.ploteus.net, the portal was officially opened to the public on 5 March 2003 by Education and Culture Commissioner Viviane Reding and is the result of a joint initiative by the European Commission’s Education and Culture Directorate General and the IDA Programme of the Enterprise General Directorate.

Taking its name from the ancient Greek word for "navigator", PLOTEUS (Portal on Learning Opportunities Throughout the European Space) directs users towards a screen listing five topics: 'Learning opportunities', 'Education systems', 'Exchanges', 'Contact', and 'Moving to a country'. Depending on the field of interest, the user clicks on a heading and goes to a screen where requests for links to more information on, for example, the primary school education system in Finland or post-graduate business administration courses in France can be made.

Since its launch, PLOTEUS.net has attracted on average between 1,500 to 2,000 visitors a day. Still in the process of being expanded and developed, the site has already had its services translated into all of the official EU languages, as well a number of accession country languages. The portal is not only limited to offering information on courses and education systems - it also gives details on potential tuition fees, opportunities for grants, local taxation systems, cost of living and recognition of foreign diplomas and qualifications.

Informally, the portal's development was prompted by the increasing number of requests received by the European Commission from citizens for more details on learning opportunities in Europe, and in particular, from European nationals wishing to continue their studies in another EU country. This demand saw its more formal expression at the European councils in Lisbon, March 2000, and Stockholm, March 2001, where it was decided to launch a new drive to improve employability and to reduce skill gaps within the EU to create greater social cohesion and a more competitive economy.

The concept of PLOTEUS was born and, together with EURES (the European information service on job opportunities), is today part of a wider Internet service aimed at supporting mobility and life-long learning throughout the EU Member States, candidate and acceding countries and the EFTA countries.

DG Enterprise’s IDA Programme played its part in PLOTEUS by funding the feasibility study for the portal in 2001. Later it followed the development and testing of the portal’s software which took just over a year to complete. The system is based on a sophisticated web-content management tool that allows a decentralized feeding of information as well as multidimensional classification and queries.

Now that the project is entering its second phase, the Commission and other relevant national authorities are working together to define a common protocol on the interconnection of national and regional databases on educational opportunities at a European level. At present, several participating countries have yet to develop a comprehensive national database, as foreseen in the
Employment guidelines for 2001 and 2002. Once these databases have been completed, interconnection at a European level will be initiated.

While this process is underway, the content for the portal will continue to be updated and improved by the National Resource Centres for Vocational Guidance, a network of 65 national centres funded jointly by the Commission’s Leonardo da Vinci programme and national authorities. The gathering and updating of information as close as possible to the source is deliberate, being part of PLOTEUS’s broader aim to establish a sustainable de-centralised database.

PLOTEUS is already bringing greater visibility to the provision of learning at a European level, as well as encouraging the development of databases on learning opportunities at a national level. In Italy, for instance, the Coordination of Regions is currently developing a common protocol for regional databases on vocational training. And in Spain, the Ministry of Education is launching a tender for the development of a portal on learning opportunities built on the PLOTEUS model. As a side advantage, PLOTEUS may even contribute to the comparability of education and training systems. With the PLOTEUS reference tool in place, navigating one’s way around the maze of educational opportunities in Europe has just been made easier.

Further information: Entr-ida@cec.eu.int

COWEBS – the social security portal for migrant workers

A key priority of the European Commission Action Plan on Skills and Mobility that was adopted on 13 February 2002 was the creation of portable supplementary pension rights for workers going to live in a different Member State. Given that national social security schemes vary considerably from one State to another, an easy access point to the financial implications of their employment rights and obligations is of great value to migrant workers. COWEBS will be implemented by DG Employment and Social Affairs in response to this need. It is a web portal that provides comprehensive information on social security issues across the European Union (EU). COWEBS is designed to help migrant workers gain rapid access to vital information by providing a 24/7 centralised system.

COWEBS will be a multilingual Internet portal, pooling social security information for migrant workers from national and European sources. The project will also provide best practices and recommendations for social security website content development in EU Member States. The portal will link national and European information sources related to the rights that come from Community provisions for coordinating Social Security. The IDA programme finances the COWEBS project, which is closely associated with other IDA-related initiatives, such as the IDA Portal Expert Group and the development of the public-services.eu portal.

How does COWEBS work?

A pilot version of the portal, limited to the pensions sector and to seven Member States (France, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom) is under development. The group of administrations in charge of the portal is currently evaluating how the COWEBS portal could be integrated into the one-stop European mobility portal aimed at providing comprehensive and easily accessible information to citizens on key aspects of jobs, mobility and learning opportunities in Europe.

To take a concrete scenario: Bob Watts is a 58-year-old UK national who has worked in a number of EU Member States during the course of his working life. He is planning to retire in two year’s time on his 60th birthday. However, he has a number of concerns regarding collecting pensions he has paid into over the years in his three different countries of residence.

In a few months’ time, Bob could find the answers to the following questions on the existing COWEBS project website.

- Where should I apply for my pension?
- How can I get the required documents for my pension application?
- From what age am I entitled to a retirement pension in each of the countries where I’ve worked?
- Is the entitlement lost in my country of origin – UK – once I start working in another EU Member State?
- How can I have my periods of unemployment regularised?
- Is there any complementary benefit for my wife and children?

The website will provide exact answers in relation to the country(ies) concerned and the personal profile of the user.

COWEBS helps Bob and all migrant workers:

- To find the competent institutions in the pension sector to claim his pension;
- To access on-line social security services: it will explain to Bob that some social security services are nationally available on-line and give him the corresponding URLs. (i.e. on-line pension calculator, etc.);
- To access a national Call Centre: Bob could directly raise questions at a national level;
- To search national websites: it should, for instance, be possible to specify the social security sector in which Bob is interested as well as the member states, and therefore guide the search;
- To access a list of links: list of main competent institutions (such as national pension websites; national healthcare websites; European social organisations; relevant European Commission websites - DG Employment). It is planned that any visitor like Bob should be in a position in this section to propose/suggest a new link, which will go online after formal approval.

Migrant workers will benefit from the COWEBS portal once it is fully operational since it will point them either directly to relevant information, or to a reference point. Accessibility for all migrant workers will be increased when multilingual content is provided.

Moreover, COWEBS will lighten the tasks of administrations – Community institutions, and national and regional administrations – by helping them to find the correct information, provide answers to the user, and translate the reply etc. Being a single-entry point for social security in Europe, COWEBS will play the role of directing users to the relevant national services and links.
The European Interoperability Framework – for improved pan-European government e-services

'To implement pan-European e-government services an agreed Interoperability Framework for Europe is a prerequisite,' concluded the IDA Sandhamn conference in Stockholm, organised jointly by the Swedish Presidency and the European Commission’s IDA Programme.

An Interoperability Framework can be defined as an overarching set of policies, standards and guidelines that describe the way in which organisations have agreed, or should agree, to do business with each other. The emergence of the information society over the last decade has triggered two related developments. On the one hand, administrations in the Member States increasingly provide their services online. European citizens now demand integrated and interoperating electronic services that offer ‘one stop shops’ and ‘no wrong doors’, free of time constraints. On the other hand, citizens and enterprises are interested not only in the services and opportunities provided at a national level but also at a European level. In order to meet both demands, it is essential to ensure the interoperability of services at the pan-European level.

There are three relevant aspects that any Interoperability Framework needs to tackle: technical, semantic and organisational interoperability. Technical interoperability covers the technical issues of linking up computer systems and services by agreeing on standards for presenting, collecting, exchanging, processing and transporting information. Semantic interoperability aims at ensuring that the meaning (semantics) of exchanged information is shared by the systems that participate in the exchange of data and allows a meaningful manner of processing information. Last, organisational interoperability is concerned with defining business goals and processes and bringing about the collaboration of administrations that wish to exchange information but may have different internal organisations and structures for their operations.

At a European level, in addition to the issues described above, the Interoperability Framework needs to meet high-level policy issues such as cultural, legislative and linguistic challenges.

The European Interoperability Framework is currently being developed under the eEurope 2005 action plan and it addresses the interoperability of government e-services to citizens and enterprises at a pan-European level. It is based on the premise that each Member State has, or is in the process of developing, its national Government Interoperability Framework and therefore focuses on supplementing national interoperability frameworks by adding the pan-European dimension. It provides guidance of a general and conceptual nature. The IDA Architecture Guidelines complement it with a description of technical issues.

The initial drafting of the European Interoperability Framework was based on extensive research into the existing interoperability frameworks of France, Germany and the United Kingdom. The comparison of different national systems gave an overview of the best practices that could be integrated in the European Interoperability Framework.

Since Interoperability means, above all, the ‘collaboration’ of systems, services and people in order to deliver results, the necessity for the different stakeholders to collaborate is key. For this reason, the development of the European Interoperability Framework is being done in close collaboration with an Experts Group of representatives from Member States, Accession Countries, and EU Institutions and Agencies. But the European Interoperability Framework is not limited to public administrations and endeavours to take into account the points of view of different actors. Co-ordination of efforts at a pan-European level should ensure an open, ongoing dialogue with the market at large (administrations, citizens, businesses, suppliers). To this end, an open consultation will be considered once the first release of the European Interoperability Framework is ready and accepted by the IDA committee (planned for September 2003). Such consultation processes at a European level will be complementary to consultation at a national level.

Clearly, the dynamic nature of government e-services makes it necessary for successive versions of the European Interoperability Framework to appear on a regular basis and integrate changing developments in the field of organisational, semantic and technical interoperability. This process of constant revision is expected to lead ultimately to a set of solutions for interoperability at a pan-European level that should facilitate the provision of user-centred e-services for administrations, citizens and enterprises.

The European Electronic Signature Standardisation Initiative (EESSI) open meeting: “European Signatures vs Global Signatures”

The current status of the IDA bridge CA project was presented at the EESSI international open meeting ‘European Signatures vs Global Signatures’. The meeting, held in Rome on 7 April 2003, was co-organised by the ICT Standards Board and InfoCamere, the informatics company of the Italian chambers of commerce confederation.
The keynote address - 'The importance of electronic signatures to foster a safe and trusted business environment' - was delivered by Mr Pedro Ortún, Director of Directorate D, services, tourism, new technologies and design industries of the Enterprise Directorate General of the European Commission.

In his presentation Mr Ortún referred to the e-signatures directive (directive 1999/93/EC) and how standards can help to implement it. On the European market for e-signatures it was pointed out that e-signatures are not yet widely used but that EESSI standards may well encourage their use. Of course, the ultimate test of any standards are their practical use, and it is envisaged that markets in online purchasing, e-marketplaces and e-procurement will further promote the use of standards-based electronic signatures. E-procurement is the big challenge for electronic signatures, and a legal framework for public e-procurement will be adopted soon. This will encourage public authorities to buy goods and services online. Mr Ortún concluded that security is essential for e-business, e-procurement and e-government. It is expected that the market demand for e-signatures will grow as e-signatures increase business efficiency by ensuring a trusted and secure end-to-end e-business environment.

The IDA bridge CA project was presented in a later session and speakers in other presentations referred to the project as 'useful for adding trust to intergovernmental applications'. In the discussion that followed the presentation, some speakers stated that a 'proper' bridge CA should cross-certify participating CAs, approve their CPS, standardise Cps etc. As the proposed IDA bridge CA will not do this (instead it distributes a signed list of the root certificates of the CAs approved for use by the Member States for their public administrations), it was suggested that consideration should be given to renaming the project the 'gateway CA', or, to use IDA terminology, the 'Eurogate CA'.

There are benefits in this approach. By making the CA’s root certificates available either through signed lists or via a repository, IDA will act as a gateway for the relying party to establish trust with the certification authority of a public administration in a Member State other than their own.

It is expected that the second set of the bridge / gateway CA project deliverables will be available at the end of June.

1 EESSI international meeting ‘Electronic signatures vs Global Signatures’ http://www.ictb2.org/Meetings/meetings.htm
2 http://www.infocamere.it/
3 http://www.unioncamere.it/
4 ETSI SR 002 176 V1.1.1 (2003-03) - Electronic Signatures and Infrastructures (ESI); Algorithms and Parameters for Secure Electronic Signatures

### Acceding Countries prepare to participate in the IDA Programme

In May 2003, IDA and the Northern eDimension Action Plan (NeDAP) jointly organised a seminar on “Effective participation in the IDA Programme”. The seminar, which was held in Swider, Poland, aimed to offer the Acceding Countries an opportunity to gain a good understanding of the necessary requirements for successfully joining the IDA Programme.

Representatives of six Acceding Countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Malta, Poland and Slovenia) took part in the seminar. The national IDA delegations of Denmark, Germany and Sweden were also present in order to provide and share experience and good practices on how a country can participate effectively in the IDA Programme. The IDA unit will organise a second seminar on the same subject for the remaining Acceding and Candidate countries later this year. The seminar is planned to be held in Bulgaria.

The format of the Seminar, which was chaired by Mr Pedro Ortún, Director for services, tourism, new technologies and design industries at the European Commission’s Enterprise Directorate-General, was meant to be interactive and open, as well as allowing ample time for informal discussion between the different participants. After a welcome note by the Chair, and an opening address by Mr Rexed, Director of NeDAP, Poland’s Undersecretary of State Leszek Cicewicz made a welcoming speech. The morning session focused on the views and recommendations of the IDA unit in relation to the Acceding Countries, with inputs and comments from the participating Member States. During the session, representatives from the IDA unit gave presentations on four topics:

1. the organisation and national coordination required for participation in the IDA Programme;
2. the sectoral projects, also known as “Projects of Common Interest”, in which Acceding Countries should be participating soon;
3. the IDA Communications Platforms, and, in particular, connectivity to the TESTA network;
4. the available software applications and other common tools which can be obtained by the participating Acceding Countries.

The afternoon was devoted to six parallel sessions, in which each of the participating Acceding Countries had the opportunity to directly exchange views and raise specific issues with one or two representatives from Member States or the IDA unit. The Acceding Countries were asked to think about their perceived strengths, as well as practical issues and problems, and to come up with a SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analysis on their participation in the IDA Programme. The analysis identified the...
IDA’s role in promoting pan-European e-government

The recent Committee of the Regions’ (CdR) Conference on local and regional e-government: connecting citizens and improving efficiency, organised by its ‘Education and Culture’ Commission, highlighted IDA’s contribution to the eEurope Action Plan, notably under the chapters on e-government and secure communication between European public administrations.

IDA’s Head of Unit, represented the programme at the conference which took place in Santorini, Greece on 12 – 13 May 2003. The event was of particular interest to IDA in view of the forthcoming transmission of a new Commission proposal for a third phase of the IDA programme to the Institutions and also for learning about the experiences, plans and priorities of regions and municipalities in the area of e-government.

Due to the nature of the programme, IDA is in the best position to promote and facilitate the implementation of e-government services at the pan-European level, notably services supporting citizens and businesses involved in cross-border activities and engaged in transactions with public administrations in Member States different from their own.

Currently, pan-European e-government services are not among the regions’ and municipalities’ prime priorities, unless stimulated by EU programmes, according to one of the event’s contributors.

The conference conclusions highlighted:

- the key role of the CdR in promoting e-government;
- the need to reinforce the exchange of information and best practices;
- the importance of the local and regional dimension, which should be given attention in the development of e-government initiatives at EU level;
- the need for a bottom-up approach that puts people first;
- the opportunity to see e-government as a new tool for modernising local / regional administrations.

The presentations of the conference are available at http://www.cor.eu.int

IDF explained – in Bulgaria

The Bulgarian public administration expressed great interest in what IDA can offer, at the recent IDA Info-Day that took place in Bulgaria on 15 April 2003.

In his opening speech, the Minister of State Administration underlined the importance of the IDA programme for the Bulgarian administration and stressed the commitment of Bulgaria towards full and efficient participation in the programme.

At the request of Professor Manliev, the organiser and host of the Info-Day, training sessions on IDA and CIRCA were conducted by IDA representatives for Bulgarian administration officials.

The interest in CIRCA is very high in Bulgaria (as well as in several other European countries) as indicated by Mr Valentin Milev of the Council of Ministers who expressed the intention of installing and applying this tool in the Bulgarian administration.

The event follows similar Info-Days previously organised in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Malta, and Cyprus allowing both IDA and candidate countries to become better acquainted and understand the benefits of IDA participation and their level of readiness.

IDF invited to Cities on the Internet Conference

The IDA programme was invited to give a presentation at the 7th Cities on the Internet Conference in Zakopane, 11 – 13 June 2003 by the Polish Local and Regional Information Society, attended by over 350 participants from 28 countries.

This year the focus was on e-government with a special emphasis on ICT applications in public administrations, the competences of government and self-government in developing e-government strategies, as well as models and best practices of e-services to citizens.

Day 2 of the conference comprised a dedicated IDF session under the title ‘Interoperability and Interchange of Data between Administrations – pan-European Services for Citizens’, chaired by Mr Dariusz Bogucki, Polish TAC delegate, and including the participation of Mr Miguel Amutio, Spanish TAC delegate.

Presentations from different countries underlined the variety of e-government actions and initiatives currently being undertaken and applied at local and regional level. The importance of such initiatives and the considerations they need to be given in the context of pan-European e-government development is fully in line with the new legal basis for the future IDA Programme, currently under finalisation.

Full conference documentation at: http://www.miastawinternecie.pl/7konferencja

CIRCA training seminar in Sofia

1 CIRCA is a groupware tool developed by IDA and largely used by the IDA Community.

2 TAC (Telematics between Administrations Committee) is the Committee of the IDA Programme.
The eGovernment Observatory aims to become a reference information source for the community of eGovernment professionals in Europe.

A strategic initiative of the IDA Programme, the eGovernment Observatory provides a valuable insight on eGovernment strategies, initiatives and projects in Europe and beyond.

Designed to help senior decision-makers in the public and private sector to closely follow up ongoing eGovernment developments, the Observatory provides the following free information services:

1. eGovernment News
   News of European interest provided on a daily basis

2. eGovernment Factsheets
   A synthetic and consistent view of the development of eGovernment in European countries

3. Publications
   A series of in-depth articles and case studies, as well as a quarterly Newsletter

4. eGovernment Resources
   A repository of essential resources including policy papers, official reports and independent surveys

5. eGovernment Events
   A list of major eGovernment-related events in Europe and beyond

To learn more please visit the eGovernment Observatory’s website:
http://europa.eu.int/ISPO/ida/ego

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