Government Services Online: Report Card

By
Andrew Limo

1. Introduction

The transformation of Government services from the paper-based, over the counter channels to alternative fully online and transactional modes will take time and resources.

Implementation of electronic Government or e-Government is a key element of Kenya's Economic and Recovery Strategy, 2003-2007.

The government is spending huge amounts of money on Information and Communication Technologies, ICTs, in order to save millions of shillings of wasteful spending on paper and duplications of services. Such technologies include computers, mobile phones, the Internet and even Radio and television.

E-government is a citizen-centred approach to governance that aims to reduce the frustrations citizens undergo in search for government services. It is a fundamental element in the modernization of government to address the dynamic needs of the citizens, businesses and even foreigners.

2. Emerging trends and ICT usage for government

The computer era-the days of the mainframes and later PCs-has now given birth to a more essential process to humanity-Communication. Communication, unlike computing is about applications and networks. A few years ago, telecommunication and computing devices started converging in a way that weaved together the personality, family, business, nation and the world. These technologies also ushered in a new knowledge-based economy, where the power of *bandwidth* rather than the computer power, is the driving force. For Kenya government to remain effective and relevant in service delivery, it must adapt its institutions and processes of governance to the opportunities and the challenges of the knowledge-age.

Most of us still hold a view of a public sector that is not responsive to the requirements of an information society. The public service has suffered many a ridicule. They used to say that when you ask a civil servant to "double click", he/she would make two short and sharp sounds with the mouth.

The laughing stock, if ever they were, are no more. I recently met a senior police officer who was a system engineer in the US before returning home. There are now more competent public servants in Kenya listening to technology and making it real. It is now possible to check school results from the ministry of Education website, download tax forms from the Kenya Revenue Authority website and police P3 forms from www.kenyapolice.go.ke. An official from KRA's technical team once told me that he would notice some activity on their Simba Online clearing system as late as 2am! What does that mean? Kenyans, people like you and me, were clearing goods online at non-traditional hours and probably from the comforts of their homes. E-services means offices are open 24/7. There are many more services being transformed in line with this emerging phenomenon. Initially we had even projected in our strategic plan to have an online voting option for 2007 elections. Of course that is a goal we may not achieve in the stipulated time.

The road to e-Government is not going to be an easy ride though. There is expensive infrastructure to be put in place and people must be trained on how to use computers and the Internet. Above all the technology must be affordable. One of the greatest challenges for e-government is how to get everyone buy into the new way of doing business. As they say change is always resisted. When countries like India introduced the use of technology, it was met by some resistance. But when Indians saw that they could make money from technology, they changed and became protagonists of the same.

Directorate of e-Government, in collaboration with Postal Corporation of Kenya recently embarked on a countrywide Information, Education and Communication programme. It was hugely successful. The programme, which targeted civil servants, aimed at stimulating interest in basic tools of communication like email. Like KRA, we do see some activity on our servers as well. I have received emails from people as far as Bungoma who confess to not having "seen the Internet" prior to our going there.

For e-Government to succeed there must be a strong commitment and leadership. There is a cabinet committee on ICT that meets regularly to evaluate and strategize on programmes being implemented. Over 130 new staff were recruited last year and posted to e-government units in the ministries. To further enhance capacity building, training is being conducted across the cadres-from senior officers to drivers.

Efforts are being made to build Local Area Networks within government ministries and departments. A design for a WAN has been completed and once it is built, it should be easy to communicate across government departments in Nairobi over the common core infrastructure.

3. Local Area Networks undertaken in 2006 and completed by end of June 06

	Building	Ministry/Dept	Capacity of PCs
1	Ardhi	Lands & Housing	1,521
2	Harambee House	OP, DPM	620
3	Transcom House	Transport	718
4	Works House	Public Works	518
5	Vigilance	Police HQs	457
6	Judiciary	Law Courts	370
7	BIMA House	Finance	530

Source: *E-government baseline survey August 2006*

It should now be evident that the government is determined to transform service delivery channels and at the same time create an enabling environment for new knowledge-based economy.

By creating the enabling environment, the government is also giving people the tools of collaboration that they need in the twenty-first century global economy. We now have four or five registered Call Centres. KenCall at Embakasi has been operating for sometime now. It is giving young people an opportunity to work for foreign companies while at home.

The government, with the support of development partners, is helping rural communities in far flung areas like Tabaka, Kisii, use ICTs to market soapstone artefacts. These are great opportunities that students from Strathmore and other institutions can help exploit further by designing more e-commerce platforms. You will have to be innovative to survive in this very competitive world.

The beauty of it all is that the Internet gives everybody an equal footing regardless of race, religion or location. What will make a difference are your skills, your aptitudes and your attitudes as well.

4. Conclusion

China joined the WTO in 2001. With many companies in the west "offshoring" and "outsourcing", China soon became a business destination for the West. Technology made is easy for companies to shift production to cheaper

destination and then get the goods into a global supply chain. China now exports more to the US than next door Mexico.

That is globalization. You should dread it if you don't have the skills to participate in it. You should thank God for it if you do (Friedman, 2005). Watch out it could be the Russian from Siberia who will take your job. Lois Pasture said "Fortune favours a prepared mind".

References

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Author:
Andrew Limo, E-Government Secretariat Government of Kenya