

Jumping the queue for official documents

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Software developed by European researchers allows citizens and local governments to exchange official documents over mobile phones. The software could help usher in the era of mobile government services and put an end to the tedium of queuing to collect official documents.

With the increased flow of workers and trade across the EU's Member States, collecting the necessary documents to meet government requirements has become part of the rite of passage for many citizens.

Registered post is often the only means of securely sending documents between local, regional and national governmental bodies in different countries. It is expensive and time consuming. Often, citizens have to line up for hours at local offices just to collect the required forms, then line up again to submit them, and wait for the process to be completed.

The EU-funded SWEB project set out to ease the pain by creating secure, interoperable and affordable software for supplying cross-border government services over a mobile device. The software is especially useful for countries without an extensive fixed line infrastructure - such as those in the Western Balkans.

“We have developed the software required for securely exchanging public administration documents between different countries using [mobile devices](#),” says SWEB project coordinator Petra Hoepner, an R&D manager at the Fraunhofer Institute for Open Communication Systems.

During the project, SWEB's researchers demonstrated that Western Balkan countries could use the software to improve their public services as part of their efforts to become EU members. These states are particularly open to such services as the penetration rates for mobile phones in the region are more than double that of fixed lines.

“With this software, regional public administrations could skip the step of electronic government and enter directly into the provision of mobile government services,” says Hoepner.

The prototype software created by SWEB essentially turns a smart phone or other mobile device with computing power into a means of securely transmitting official documents containing private information.

The application can send lightweight documents quickly when in range of mobile networks because no permanent connection is needed. In this way, the user pays the least possible connection charge, an important consideration for mobile service users especially in Europe's poorer regions.

Testing the software

The software was installed and tested at municipal governments in Siena, Italy; Tirana, Albania; Skopje, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and Backi Petrovac and the Municipality of Stari Grad, Serbia.

The team used a pilot infrastructure made up of servers hosting the SWEB software and services in each municipality, one or more workstations hosting the client application used by the civil servants, and mobile devices or smart phones loaded with the mobile application for the test users.

Authentication was provided through a security token, a digital means of communicating a user's identity. Other security services time stamp documents.

Over a three-month period about 160 citizens participated in testing the SWEB software using their mobile devices. The test users were able to access two services. One was a residence certification service. This was set up by the project as an example of a secure municipal document exchange service. Using the service, public organisations and citizens could securely exchange digital documents relating to their proof of residence.

The second test service demonstrated the software could issue electronic or mobile invoices. Electronic invoicing is playing an increasingly crucial role in the value-added tax (VAT) procedures in EU Member States. The SWEB system demonstrated it could provide a mobile way for small businesses to issue invoices to the public administration, Hoepner says.

At the end of the trial, SWEB surveyed the test users. The feedback indicated that they wanted mobile government services so as to reduce time-consuming administrative procedures, Hoepner says.

However, the trials also revealed concerns from users over the lack of a legislative and regulatory framework throughout the EU that would allow governments to provide such services. The wider availability of fast connection speeds and high-end mobile devices are also needed to make the SWEB services work smoothly.

Enabling governments to deliver electronic documents

The software was designed to operate on existing public administrative networks and according to global standards for mobile web services. The

software is open source, allowing it to be used freely by anyone who wants to adapt it for their specific needs.

Hoepner says the SWEB system is now available to other municipalities who want to use it for transmitting documents to citizens and businesses. SWEB could help enable governments to improve their administrative processes and their ability to respond to requests for documents across borders.

And in the Western Balkans, where [local governments](#) are attempting to modernise their administrative processes to accommodate the changes required to become members of the EU, the software could provide a means of helping them leapfrog into providing better services.

For example, an Albanian citizen living in Berlin, Germany would be able to use the SWEB software to request a residence certificate electronically from his home town in Tirana. The Albanian would access SWEB at the Berlin municipal office via his mobile device, fill out an electronic request form, authenticate the request and then submit it.

The Berlin municipality would then forward the request electronically to the Albanian municipality. The required certificate would be signed by an administrator in Tirana and returned to Berlin. The citizen would receive a notification and then download the document to his mobile device.

The SWEB consortium is made up of twelve project partners, of which four are based in EU Member States (Greece, Italy and Germany), and eight in three Western Balkan countries (Serbia, Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

More information: SWEB project -- www.sweb-project.org/

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