'Digital by default' – efficient eGovernment or costly flop?

May 5 2014, by Rob Livingstone

Setting up an opt-out digital eGovernment is an expensive process … it would want to be worth it. Credit: ~lauren/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

The Australian federal government's recently published National Commission of Audit's recommendation 62: e-Government suggests the government accelerate its transition to online service delivery that:

makes myGov the default means of engaging with government, supported

by "opt-out" provisions; sets concrete savings targets; removes legislative barriers; and strengthens the myGov online credential; consolidating the e-Government effort through a single team under the leadership of a Chief Digital Officer; and appointing a senior minister to champion the digital by default agenda.

Given the politically charged nature of this report, one fact that cannot and should not be ignored by the policy makers is any aggressive and wholesale move to a comprehensive eGovernment platform for all services should be carefully considered.

There are very real risks that an unduly aggressive approach to the implementation of an comprehensive eGovernment platform is likely to guarantee a high probability of project failure – not to mention the increased cost to the taxpayers.

eGovernment is the objective: all agreed

As an individual, the convenience of managing one's interactions with a range of government agencies online, in your own time by using your PC or mobile device, as opposed to waiting in line at the various government agency offices between the hours of 9am-5pm weekdays with a fistful of paperwork cannot be understated.

As the penetration rate and uptake of smart mobile technologies reaches saturation rate for the Australian population in the coming years, it makes real sense to accelerate the move towards eGovernment.

Gone will be the days of a large cadre of government workers entering, checking and shepherding our tax, Medicare, social security and other transactions through the various organs of government. Without the automation and "hands free" backend processing capability, the near instantaneous, online customer experience would not be possible in our

24x7 world.

The numbers also stack up in favour of eGovernment. According to the 2013 Canadian auditor general's report, the per-transaction costs among 11 selected departments were CAN$28.80 in person, CAN$11.69 by telephone, and CAN$0.13 online.

The 2013 UK government's digital strategy report has identified that: "by going digital by default, the government could save between £1.7 and £1.8 billion each year."

Convenience at low cost – that's enough to bring tears of joy to any government treasury official. Where's the catch, then?

Divide and conquer – or integrate and conquer?

The 2012 UN E-Government Survey should be mandatory bedtime reading for our politicians and policy makers – particularly section 3.2, which covers the challenges and opportunities of integrated e-service delivery.

First, the road to comprehensive, successful, secure and effective eGovernment is seeded with multiple traps, the most dangerous of which has little to do with technology, paradoxically.

Studying objectively and carefully the wash-up of previous failures is an effective antidote for policy delusion, but is unlikely to be the path taken by political ideologues of any persuasion.

The string of large, taxpayer-funded IT failures such as New Zealand's INCIS Police project, NSW COPS system, Queensland Health's A$1.2 billion payroll disaster and UK's disastrous multi-billion pound National Health IT initiative have been well reported, but oft repeated,

unfortunately.

Second,the National Commission of Audit urges the government to follow a "digital by default" strategy with an "aggressive new approach". It is this latter quote that should raise alarm bells.

While these, and similar high level statements of strategy and intent made by senior bureaucrats and our political elite are useful to set the pace, tone and direction of a move towards a comprehensive eGovernment platform, the reality is that the predominant challenge in achieving that goal is not technical.

Ultimate success of eGovernment (or any other enterprise-IT project, for that matter) has a less to do with technology that may appear.

Anyone who has ever worked in an organisation of size – be that public, private or not for profit – knows all too well that the internal boundaries defining teams, departments, divisions and business units are the sheep's pens that limit cross organisational collaboration and integration.

It is the continued reinforcing of these boundaries, glued together with policies, process and governance that inhibit the development of a government-wide culture of cooperative information and knowledge sharing, and it is this cross-functional and cross-agency collaboration that is a prerequisite for effective eGovernment.

Data breach, privacy and short term thinking – the real risks

Once operational, the obvious risks to eGovernment relate to data confidentiality and information security. Having a major data breach as a result of an human error, an Edward Snowdon-like event, or cyber

crime is a real and present danger for individual's privacy and the potential integrity of the entire eGovernment.

The ICAC uncovering of systemic, undisclosed lobbying by vested (political or commercial) interests makes for great television and dinner conversation. The reality is that the coercive forces acting on governments at all levels from the cadre of local and globally dominant IT service providers and consulting firms on helping shape eGovernment policy should not be ignored.

It is important to acknowledge that the conventional approach to managing IT vendors may not be adequate in the delivery of new, emerging and disruptive technologies. A strategic rethink of the vendor engagement and management processes should be considered.

It is imperative that governments internally retain the necessary levels of IT strategic expertise and process probity when engaging with external IT service providers. Taxpayers have a habit of helping strengthen the balance sheets of major IT and consulting organisations with no measurable benefit as a result of inappropriate decision making.

The eGovernment discussion is likely to be trumped by more hotly debated issues of social equity, tax, Medicare reform and other initiatives that affect all – but the importance of ensuring that the appropriate decisions are made with rigour and based in evidence when it comes to implementing a comprehensive eGovernment system on which our country will increasingly depend. And therein lies a real risk.

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