Switzerland’s eGovernment strategy

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The use of information and communication technologies in government and public services, known in short as eGovernment, has become a yardstick to measure the evolution of government and public administration in all developed societies and economies. eGovernment is of great importance in particular because of its connections with other key areas of our modern information and knowledge society. Efficient government processes contribute to an attractive location for business and other private organisations. Furthermore, electronic means of communication facilitate the interactions between citizens and administrations. In addition, the increased use of information and communication technologies in education, in research, in culture as well as in health care (eHealth) is a key factor to keep pace with international competition.

Within this context, eGovernment takes an important place in the report on the Federal Council’s Strategy for an Information Society of January 2006. An eGovernment strategy to be jointly developed by the cantons and the Confederation, should contribute to help Switzerland ahead in the use and provision of electronic services by the government and the administration. By means of sharing experience and of optimal compatibility, Switzerland wants to hold its own with respect to the EU of tomorrow, which has set itself the goal of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy and society in the world by the year 2010 (as laid down in i2010).

The Confederation and the cantons consider a cooperative approach across all federal levels to be of strategic importance in the area of eGovernment and therefore want to utilise synergies through cooperation, thus achieving efficiency gains. An efficient, transparent and customer-friendly public administration on all three levels of government is of central importance for maintaining competitiveness in a globalised knowledge-based society and for maintaining the standard of living.

For these reasons the Confederation and the cantons want to gear their efforts, within the scope of Switzerland’s eGovernment strategy, towards common objectives and a joint approach for implementation. The present strategy provide them and the municipalities with guidelines for their own eGovernment strategies and measures. The objectives, the principles drawn up to reach them, the guidelines for implementation and the catalogue of prioritised projects were drawn up jointly.

Based on this strategy, the Confederation and the cantons are committed to a joint agreement for the concrete implementation in the next four years.
1. The potential of eGovernment

1.1 eGovernment for an efficient and citizen-oriented administration

With the use of information and communication technologies, the activities of the administration should become as efficient and as close to the citizens as possible. This is what is meant by the term eGovernment. This potential can only be fully developed when synergies between the various services and between the different federal levels are fully exploited. This represents a special challenge for Switzerland due to its state structure. What up to now was conveyed on paper by the post office or by messenger from one public office to the next and then finally brought to the customer of the administration, will henceforth be processed and transmitted electronically.

Business and the population expect their affairs to be dealt with in a flexible and efficient way, beyond organisational limits and federal hierarchies. So as to ensure that this occurs, existing administrative processes must be optimised across organisations at different levels, and the various administrative authorities must cooperate more closely via their ICT systems. The understanding of the interfaces between processes involving several organisations is of central importance to achieve a seamless provision of services. The definition of standards allowing data to be exchanged is indispensable.

1.2 Benefiting from synergies by using harmonised processes

Over the past few years, many applications, even costly ones, were repeatedly developed several times by different agencies, each one of them re-inventing the wheel. In addition, the awareness of the potential of eGovernment grew only slowly among political decision makers as well as in the administrations. This has led to a less than efficient use of the scarce financial and personnel resources in the public sector, with the consequence that the full potential for using electronic means of communication and for conducting business by the government and the administration has, by far, not yet been fully utilised. Furthermore, the traditional paper-based administration in Switzerland works comparatively well, which is why there has been less direct pressure to take action than in other countries.

Very often cooperation between many agencies, across organisational boundaries, is required to provide public services. Despite this fact, business and the population are entitled to expect that their requests will be handled quickly and efficiently. Due to the fact that in most administrations the same or similar processes for the provision of services are used, the principle “develop once, use many times” makes a lot of sense and should be practiced. Costs can be considerably reduced through standardisation and common solutions while at the same time improving user-friendliness.

Therefore, there is a large potential within process-oriented eGovernment applications for cutting down bureaucracy. This potential will only be utilised to the full when the processes underlying the services will have been examined and optimised in terms of requirements, simplification and standardisation. When eGovernment and process optimisation work hand in hand they make an important contribution towards reducing the administrative burden.
1.3 Using eGovernment to increase the quality of the economic location

The demand from business for electronic services from the authorities is particularly strong, because due to the corresponding simplification, business would be considerably relieved of work which is not value creating. The expected increase in efficiency in operations is of great significance for Switzerland as a location for business.

IT and telecommunications are in general a rapidly growing sector of the economy. According to the EU, a quarter of the EU's GDP and approximately 40% of its growth in productivity can be attributed to ICT. With economic growth, employment and international competitiveness in mind, the EU is attempting to spur on this expanding sector. The strategy for an information society i2010 is aiming towards remodelling the EU into the most competitive, knowledge-based economic region through the use of ICT and at the same time promoting social integration within the community.

With the initiatives and standardisation which have been triggered off in the EU by eGovernment, the framework for the economy in international markets has been radically changed. Switzerland is directly affected by this and will have to create optimum prerequisites in this regard.

1.4 Federalism as an opportunity

This strategy supports the decision makers at all federal levels in the exercise of their functions, whereby it sets clear, common goals. The instruments used enable eGovernment managers to keep an eye on everything and at the same time sort out their work.

Switzerland’s distinctive federal system is comprised of many, in part very small autonomous administrative units. Decentralised organisation such as this has the advantage of being close to the people and also close to reality. It gives creative administrative bodies and those which show initiative room for manoeuvre and is thereby able to promote innovation. This structure, however, makes the integrated electronic provision of services across organisations more costly and complicated and increases the need for coordination and management.

With the Swiss eGovernment strategy, the full potential of innovative public sector bodies should be tapped by the Confederation, the cantons and the municipalities. And at the same time, by adopting a coordinated approach, the current shortcoming of a lack of management should be remedied. By adopting the principle "multiple usage and open standards", the federal state will become a "creative pool" instead of being a stumbling block. Implementation of this strategy should thus proceed via jointly prioritised projects and a joint steering committee. Through promoting the exchange of experience and harmonised processes, along with appointing project leader organisations for the advancement of projects, targeted investments are made in solutions which can be reused several times, thereby achieving the objectives with minimum investment.

Within the scope of international cooperation, public sector service providers have to take into account interfaces with partners, and make use of the experience and best practices from other countries.

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1 Cf. i2010 - A European Information Society for Growth and Employment p.3.

2. Objectives of the eGovernment strategy

Switzerland’s eGovernment strategy pursues three objectives, listed below in order of importance:

1. The business community conducts the administrative procedures with the authorities electronically.
2. The authorities have modernised their business processes and deal with each other electronically.
3. The population can conduct important - frequent or complex - administrative procedures with the authorities electronically.

Carrying out administrative procedures end-to-end electronically will ease bureaucracy for business, for individuals and for the administration and will reduce costs.

Within the administration, the use of ICT enables decisions to be taken more rapidly, there are fewer personnel-intensive processes, the work organisation is more streamlined and better networked. For the population and for the business community, better services, less complex dealings, unrestricted by time or place, as well as transparency and better understanding of the modus operandi of the administration will be achieved.

3. Principles for achieving the objectives

The strategy for achieving the objectives is based on seven core principles:

1. Orientation on services and processes:
   Instead of badly coordinated, costly and isolated eGovernment solutions, work is being jointly carried out on mutual solutions. These will be based on a common understanding of processes and services. A standardised management of electronic data and of documents, from their creation right through to their archiving, is crucial to ensure legal security and traceability of administrative actions.

2. Focus and priorities:
   The implementation of eGovernment concentrates on a small number of priorities, oriented to the needs of the target groups and not to technical possibilities.

3. Transparency and commitment:
   The strategy defines clear responsibilities and decision-making processes. Planning instruments have to be managed transparently and regularly updated, thus allowing traceability of actions.

4. Innovation thanks to federalism:
   The full potential of innovative public sector agencies should be fully exploited, while at the same time allowing for overriding steering, thanks to common processes and well-defined organisational structures.

5. Savings thanks to multiple usage and open standards:
   With the principle “develop once, use many times”, with open standards and with mutual exchanges, the use of investments will be optimised.

6. Access for all:
   Meeting recognised standards ensures an inclusive approach to eGovernment solutions free of barriers, also for the elderly and for the handicapped.

7. Support of the decision makers:
   Specific implementation and control instruments enable the political and operative decision makers to perform their tasks and responsibilities.
4. Implementation: catalogue of prioritised projects and other instruments

The eGovernment strategy will be put into effect by means of specific projects, some of which are already underway, and some of which are yet to be initiated. The most important instrument for implementation is thus the catalogue of prioritised projects, which will have to be updated periodically. The catalogue is structured along two action lines:

I. **Prioritising services**: The public services selected for priority implementation are the ones which, from the point of view of the target groups and from that of the administration, will show a particularly favourable cost-benefit ratio when provided electronically.

II. **Make prerequisites available**: In many cases there are legal, procedural, organisational or technical prerequisites to be put in place before prioritised services can be offered. Processes have to be harmonised and infrastructures have to be made available, either centrally or jointly.

The catalogue contains on the one hand services to end-users, whereas a distinction is made between those services requiring coordination across organisational boundaries and those for which a country-wide implementation in a decentralised way can be carried out, with exchange of experience. On the other hand, the catalogue contains prerequisites which are indispensable for several of the services and for which a country-wide coordination is essential.

Together with other planning and management instruments, to be regularly updated, transparency and overviews will be generated for eGovernment managers of all federal levels. Of particular importance are data on deadlines and milestones of the projects, which are to be specified in detailed implementation measures. The cockpit, in which figures on the status of implementation are gathered, allows progress assessments to be made based on set objectives and deadlines and indirectly to ascertain Switzerland’s position at the international level.

At the end of four years an *assessment* will be carried out.

5. Agreement on organisation and funding

An organisational structure for implementation, based on the eGovernment strategy, is to be specified in a framework agreement between the Confederation and the cantons. Organisation and financing of specific projects can be specified in special agreements.

An important component of the framework agreement is the creation of a joint steering committee with a support office. The agreement covers tasks, responsibilities and funding of the steering structure.
Conclusion

The use of ICT for integrated and cross-organisational administration processes and the necessary modernisation of the administration that this implies must be implemented via the normal management structures in the administration.

Based on a mutual understanding of what is politically required, the Confederation and the cantons indicate by means of the present strategy which objectives and processes are to be pursued in eGovernment at government level. For the ministries and agencies, the strategy is a mandate to begin with implementation.

The driving force will be the so-called "project leader organisations" in charge of the advancement and coordinated implementation of specific prioritised projects. These organisations will be responsible for setting up the organisation and securing the funding of their project. Because of the diverse nature of the prioritised projects, in particular regarding sponsorship and funding, these aspects will have to be regulated, if necessary, by special agreements.