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Better public services for growth and jobs

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Statement of Jane E. Fountain

There is a great danger of automation of the status quo, by this I mean automation of existing processes, procedures, and institutional arrangements. By contrast, for at least the past 25 years, innovative businesses and industries have been re-engineering or redesigning their business processes – as well as their value chains and, indeed, entire industry structures -- in order to leverage the capabilities made possible by ICT.

There are many examples in the European Union of similar process redesign in and across governments. The position I will take in this debate is that e-government has reached a level of maturity to move beyond simple service provision and e-government forward-looking emphasis should shift more in the direction of the best avenues for institutional redesign. In some cases such efforts would include possibly radical redesign of government processes. (For example, e-government developments that support and enable global financial systems and global trade offer important examples.)

In particular, there is value to be created for growth and jobs in integration of services across programs, departments and governments. These cross-governmental initiatives yield great promise and represent a key “next step” in producing “better public services.”

The substantial risk in not taking this step into cross-boundary redesign is that systems are being built upon outdated institutional and management arrangements and such systems will be difficult and expensive to change. So the timing of this “next step” and its urgency is an important issue as well.

At the limit, some emphasis should be given to governmentwide – and to EU wide – projects that would shift some attention in e-government to the structure and information flows across the entire enterprise. Working at this high level would allow sufficient scope and authority for redesign efforts. Naturally, there should be strong citizen participation in design and development and strong use of pilots and experiments along the way before making large project commitments. There is no question that such efforts are more difficult and complex to envision and implement, yet the return on such investments is expected to be substantial.

Finally, one of the major opportunities for ICT to contribute to growth and jobs is to align the recommended e-government public service efforts with existing policies meant to *activate knowledge*, that is, with an emphasis on the building of knowledge societies and information economies. Many e-government service efforts support traditional sectors and industries, which is entirely appropriate and necessary. Yet there is considerable growth potential in e-government efforts to develop and support knowledge industries. Moreover, many traditional industries themselves are being transformed by ICT and rely on alignment with e-government processes that facilitate such transformation. In sum, e-government efforts should be aligned with policies to *activate knowledge*; thus, they should support, enrich and catalyze existing policy orientations toward knowledge

production, knowledge sharing, and the governmental and economic information infrastructure necessary to develop and support the information economy.

Definition of “better public service”

My definition of “better public service,” therefore, requires a thorough rethinking and re-examination of the structure of public services to examine and then to exploit possibilities to create value by working across boundaries and jurisdictions. Again, it is imperative to avoid putting the status quo online and accepting “second best” gains in speed and cost while forgoing the potential gains of redesigned services.

Simply making an existing service strategy “faster and cheaper” is not a strategic value proposition. Although traditional performance measures and return on investment models will be well served by “faster and cheaper” services, they can produce lost opportunities and can lock in ineffective structures by building complex and expensive IT systems around them. By contrast, note the substantial restructuring of the book selling industry by Amazon.com, the complete restructuring of the music industry by a range of new firms and consumer practices, the transformation of photography by digital cameras, etc. Although governments should not and cannot be radically changed at the rapid clip of business, there is a clear need for fundamental rethinking of some practices and arrangements in order to better align the structure and practices of the state with the structure of information economies and knowledge societies.

Key initiatives that should be undertaken at a European or national level, by governments or industries or both.

There are many important initiatives to be undertaken. For this reason, a portfolio approach that utilizes balancing risk, return, and several strategic priorities should be emphasized. For reasons of time, I will suggest two initiatives here.

The first key initiative should focus on opportunities and thorough examination of “best practices” in cross-jurisdictional initiatives. There are many such successful initiatives in Europe to be mined for information and to be shared across the EU. Several researchers globally examine the success factors for such initiatives. This emerging knowledge base should also be mined and shared widely to form a base for knowledge exchange. At the cutting edge of research is the working out of core governance challenges in such networked projects. These include but are not limited to joint accountability, joint budgeting and resourcing, joint management and leadership, and joint operations. Laying the management and practical foundation for integrated initiatives is a key imperative for e-government and “next generation” public services. Funding should include on-the-ground experiments as well as university and research institute examinations and synthesis of current knowledge.

The second key initiative is production of strong “communities of practice” among civil servants and a significant strengthening of the education and training of the young people who will become the next generation of civil servants. It is the professional civil servants who will work out the intricate policy, legal, operational and technological details of such integrated systems. Their partnership with IT industry professionals needs to be one of equals rather than a simple outsourcing of IT strategy and development.

A two-pronged initiative would include, first, support and facilitation of communities of practice among civil servants and related experts at the European and regional levels, perhaps coupled with specific projects that would be undertaken. The second prong of this initiative entails support for the development of the future civil servants who will be guiding Europe and the countries within it for the next generation. Funding and planning for modernization of university programs within which such civil servants would be trained is a key imperative. Universities, working with industry and other research institutes, are (or should be) a central source of knowledge creation, long-range thinking, innovation, experimentation and a place for the linking of the traditional legal and governmental knowledge base with the realities and challenges of pervasive computing.

The danger is not following the second initiative is a civil service unable to effectively partner with industry to re-envision public services and an inadequate translation of e-commerce practices to e-government without the necessary thinking through of fundamental differences between the public and private sectors. Simplistic views of contracting and outsourcing are now giving way to more realistic views of partnership. A second danger in underinvestment in the professional growth of the civil service is to assume that civil servants are, on average, an impediment to progress when in fact they are central and key knowledge experts at the core of the initiation, design, development, implementation and productive operation and refinement of e-government public services.