

Book Reviews

Reinventing Government in the Information Age

edited by Richard Heeks

International Practice in IT-enabled Public Sector Reform

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As editor of the book, Richard Heeks has structured the papers of 19 contributors, including himself, in five Parts and seventeen Chapters and provided an Appendix as educators' guide.

"Reinventing Government" is a new terminology for change in the public sector and a message about the positive potential of this change, as a need for reform, under the pressure of information technologies. The book is focused on Information Age, addressing a long-standing reform agenda based on information and the use of information technologies, with an international perspective based on cases and experience from Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa, Latin America and North America.

The book addresses the main audience: practitioners, students, educators and researchers, as it provides a new model for reinventing government in the information age, a guidance to reform initiatives and recommendations on the best practice around the world. The book is divided into **five Parts**: Part 1 gives an overview, model and guidance on the information age reform and Part 2 through Part 5 present case studies, with conclusions and recommendations.

Part 1 entitled "Information age reform" is mainly based on the contributions made by the editor, Richard Heeks, as author of two Chapters, and co-author of other two Chapters.

From the beginning, in **Chapter 1**, Richard Heeks defines "Government reinvention" as a new terminology and as a repackaging for longer-term processes of public sector reform, that consists of five main components: increased efficiency, decentralisation, increased accountability, improved resource management and marketisation under the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT), which are defined in connection with

information systems, to be defined in their turn as systems of human and technical components.

Chapter 2 describes four different approaches to reform that have appeared in time: "ignore" (ignorant of ICT...), "isolate" (lack of understanding of ICT), "idolise" (ICT can transform the business of government...), and "integrate" (recognition of ICT as a key organisational resource that is central to all government functions...). Reacting to the conclusion that it is integration that makes the approach most likely to yield information age reform benefits, the authors are presenting **barriers** to an integrated approach:

- it restricts progress from the "ignore" approach,
- it includes drivers that encourage continuance of the "idolise" approach,
- it restricts diffusion of the "integrate" approach (including technical, skills and knowledge, structural and cultural "barriers", etc.).

Chapter 3 develops a model (ITPOSM) of information systems and reform within information age, based on case examples of reform success and failure.

Chapter 4 presents the practical implications of the ITPOSM model dimensions of change as a gap between current reality and design proposal for a new system (conception). If the reform is to be sustainable, the life time costs must be less than or equal to the financial resources available, and if not, there are two ways of addressing the financial gap: to change the type of financial resources and to change financial designs, including outsourcing to provide a service that might otherwise be provided in-house. It is also considered the skills gap, the gap of stakeholders' objectives and motivation, or the change of the design, because, for the public sectors, the KISS (Keep It Small and Simple) concept is of high relevance.

Part 2, referring "Management Information Systems" (MIS), presents case studies of internal MIS in the public sector. **Chapter 5** is an evaluation of the approach made by the US public agency in developing a MIS to support improved performance management, with the alternative of an evolutionary design process, with an emphasis on rapid prototyping, and subsequent integration of small-scale data sets.

Chapter 6 describes the results of the public sector MIS evaluation in Ghana, Uganda and Zimbabwe, especially for automation of personnel records, aimed to improve the management of human resources. The Appendix to this Chapter covers a large number of problems encountered during the elaboration of case studies and a handful of might-be solutions to the problems.

Chapter 7 makes an evaluation of the MIS implementation to support public healthcare reform in Ecuador, with a major objective pursued: facilitation of a radical decentralisation of management functions. There are included valuable recommendations for a realistic approach to reform initiatives involving MIS.

Part 3 presents case studies for information systems that link government with organisations or groups outside government, including citizens. **Chapter 8** is planned as an evaluation of the Swedish example of using Internet-enabled applications (especially WWW) as a link between citizens and local government, as a component of democratisation processes in public sector reform. Recommendations are made that address the contradictions that stand for tensions or conflicts or opposite views related to the use of Internet-enabled applications in government: intra-government links, government-citizen interaction, virtual communities as citizen-citizen interaction.

Chapter 9 discusses South-Africa's post-apartheid context of reform initiatives that democratise the state and that empower and develop local communities, for example the creation of "multi-purpose community centres" in using ICT. Based on this experience, brief guidelines for ICT-enabled democratisation initiatives are proposed.

Chapter 10 refers to democratisation, which as improving the scope and quality of democracy, represents a key component of public sector reform, based on the opportunity offered by ICT. There are described four generic models of democracy: Aristotelian-style direct democracy (associated with city-state), mediated or

representative democracy (associated with nation-state), and ICT-facilitated and mediated "electronic democracy" (associated with global information infrastructure). An analysis of all these suggests that, while democratic principles may remain untouched, many democratic processes are in crisis and need to be reinvented if electronic democracy is to meet current and future hopes for a better life.

Part 4 presents, taking the case of the USA as an example, the need for strategic planning across whole governments, and across whole nations, imposed by information age reform.

Chapter 11 starts with the setting out of the background of public sector reform as early as the 1980's until such reform initiatives as "National Performance Review" (NPR, 1993), aiming at "creating a government that works better and costs less", on the basis of ICT. Given the magnitude of costs and of some failures, a new law, the Information Technology Management Reform Act (ITMRA, 1996) stipulated for the reform of the old accountability mechanisms in the acquisition of IT and the management of information system development projects. The Chapter recommends several management and accountability practices to find out more opportunities for project success.

Chapter 12 reviews the development of an IT strategy in Barbados, based on the UK model, implemented by a group of consultants, using a consortium approach and the outsourcing. Because of the significant gaps existing between the conceptions of the model and the realities of the local skills, business practices, culture and use of information, a modified approach will certainly be required.

The last Chapter of Part 4 is oriented to training needs for information age reform in the public sector. **Chapter 13** draws on evidence from developed and developing countries, and on attitudes of public sector managers in Malawi. As a conclusion, the IT-related training requirements generated by information age reform fall into three categories: knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Part 5 presents case studies of organisation-wide strategic planning initiatives in information age reform, a fact that imposes requirements for this kind of planning at the highest level of public sector administration.

Chapter 14 discusses some of the potential problems of strategic information systems

planning (SISP), with reference to the UK's National Health Service.

Chapter 15 describes many ways in which ICT can be used to support public sector reengineering, and proposes the concept of **Public Sector Processes REBuilding (PUPREB)**.

Chapter 16 highlights an increased need for performance evaluation induced by public sector reform. The example is taken from an UK public healthcare organisation involved in a process of marketisation reform, that separated service purchasers from service providers. This altered performance information needs. For that a performance measurement framework was used, to conduct a gap analysis between current information provision and new performance information needs.

The **last Chapter** of the Volume estimates that new uses for information systems make it imperative for current staffing levels to increase and new skills to be acquired. Human resources departments are faced with redefining positions, career paths, compensation schemes and recruiting techniques. As Appendix, there is given an educators' guide, with IT and Information Systems journals that include public sector cases, which can be picked up from a number of Web sites nominated for every Part of the book.

I must confess that I have read an exciting book which, in parallel to giving some indication of in what direction the future may lie, invites reflection and calls for action and quick-minded attitude.

Thanks should go to the editor and to Routledge for doing a splendid job in publishing such a text.

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