

SEAMLESS GOVERNMENT: ENHANCING PUBLIC SECTOR SERVICE DELIVERY IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract

Seamless Government is a paradigm that prescribes the behavior of government agencies and departments, so as to better respond to the needs and demands of the citizens and businesses based on the collaboration and networking between or among the various government units. It is a paradigm that presupposes the responsiveness of government agencies and departments to the needs of the citizenry. Seamless Government enables the provision of customer focused, high quality public services, accessed through one-stop contact and grouped according to the needs of customers.

This would in turn foster efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector in the provision of goods and services consumed by the citizens. Efficiency would be improved in government operations by reducing or eliminating duplication of efforts and making better use of public resources which are scarce by and large.

Seamless government would in effect make government more responsive to the needs of the citizenry. Seamless Government is about the power of simplicity, about removing unnecessary steps, about connecting the frontline employees directly with the end users of the product or service provided. Linden (1998), states that a seamless service is effortless service, for both the customer and the provider. This service is mostly characterized by words such as fluid, integrated, connected and transparent.

In a seamless experience, the provider has a direct connection with the end user with no surprises or hidden problems or run-arounds. Modern governments, particularly those in the developing countries must work towards Seamless Government development in order to enhance service delivery and create value for the tax payers.

This paper endeavors to briefly introduce this paradigm, analyze its main concepts and characteristics and apply it to governmental operations as a factor in enhancing efficiency in public service delivery with a special reference to developing countries in general and Zambia in particular.

Key Words: *Seamless Government, Seamless Service, Public Service Delivery, Public Value, Responsiveness, Electronic Government, Efficiency, Integration*

Introduction

Modern governments are increasingly under pressure from the citizenry and the private sector to among other things; be more open and transparent in managing public resources (Funds and Material); deliver high quality public services that will meet the needs of the citizens; engage citizens in developing public policies that reflect the expectations of the public; efficiently and effectively implement these policies; stimulate economic development of the country through administrative simplification and support for small scale and start up businesses and promote the rule of law, social development and equal access to opportunities. At the same time, these governments must respond to the forces of globalization by creating conditions that strengthen competitiveness of their businesses through developing the digital economy and information base as a whole.

The above pressures create a demand for continuous improvement in government operations and the use of information and Communication Technology across the whole public sector to enable improvement through the underlying organizational change. In order to respond to these pressures, modern governments engage in two mutually dependant initiatives; viz; *Public Sector Reform*, - that is introducing structural and process changes in governments with the primary objective of improving efficiency, and *Electronic Government (E-Government)* – entailing the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially the internet, as a tool to achieve efficient and responsive government.

These two initiatives; *Public Sector Reform* and *E-Government* depend on one another. However, E-government is an enabler in view of the Public Sector Reform. This is so because organizational transformation has to rely on ICTs for all but the simplest tasks. Nonetheless E-government cannot succeed without a considerable amount of structural and process re-engineering to prepare government agencies and departments for technological adoption.

This implies that digitizing government information and putting it online is not sufficient in and of itself. In order for ICTs to effectively contribution to government efficiency and responsiveness, deep changes in processes, structure and culture of the government are required when agencies begin to offer interactive and transactional services , especially those that cross agency or departmental boundaries.

Hence this paper endeavors to present the concept of Seamless Government as the most developed or mature stage of e-government so as to help public administrators of traditional administrative organizations rethink about how their organizations provide the public with information and service.

Electronic Government

McClure (2000), states that Electronic Government refers to government's use of technology, particularly web-based internet applications to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens, business partners, employees, other agencies, and government entities. To this effect it has the potential to help build better relationships between government and the public by making interaction with the citizens smoother, easier and more efficient and transparent.

There are various stages of development of e-government which basically outline the structural transformations of governments as they progress toward electronically – enabled government and how the internet-based government models can be amalgamated with traditional public administration. In this regard, there are four (4) stages for the growth of e-government: viz; (1) cataloguing, (2) transaction, (3) vertical integration, and (4) horizontal integration, (Layne and Lee, 2001).

In the first stage of cataloguing, the main focus of governments is on establishing an online presence for the government. Many web development and forms on-line belong to this stage. This stage is mostly limited to on-line presentations of government information. This information can be very limited, (West, 2000). Toward the end of this stage, mostly due to citizens' demands, governments begin to establish index pages or a localized portal site in which scattered electronic documents are organized so as to enable citizens search and view detailed government related information and download necessary forms. Basically, this stage focuses on cataloguing government information and presenting on the web. Hence, the name thereof.

The second stage called Transaction – based e-government focuses on connecting the internal government system to on-line interfaces and allowing citizens to transact with government electronically. Layne and Lee (2001), states that at this stage, e-government efforts consists of putting live database links to on-line interfaces, so that, for example, citizens may transact with government agencies on a number of services such as renewing licenses and passports, paying fines or registering births and deaths. In ideal situations, such web transactions should be posted directly to the internally functioning government systems with minimal interaction with government staff.

Further, citizens' demands and changes in society tend to push governments to go further as the critical benefits of implementing e-government are actually derived from the integration of underlying processes not only across different levels of government but also different functions of government. By having similar agencies with different functionality across different levels of government talk to each, citizens will see the

government as an integrated information base. This means that ultimately a citizen can contact one point of government and complete any level of governmental transaction – a “one-stop shopping” concept. This would in turn eliminate redundancies and inconsistencies in their information bases for citizens, (Layne and Lee, 2001).

This integration would take place in two ways: vertical and horizontal. Vertical integration refers to local and central governments connecting for different functions or services of the government. Horizontal integration on the other hand, is defined as the integration across different functions and services of government. It provides more access for other governments and possibly businesses than it does for the citizen. Horizontal integration should not be perceived by the citizen as a tool to collect electronic data which would be used to garner information about the individual, (Blanchette and Johnson, 1998). However, the vertical integration across different levels within similar functionality is posited to precede the horizontal integration across different functions. An example would be a citizen being able to pay land development charges to the local council and land rent to the ministry of lands in Zambia because the systems in both agencies would be talking to each other or will be working from the same database.

The emphasis in E-Government practice is on enabling collaboration and networking between government agencies, which results in Seamless Government. It follows, therefore, that Seamless Government promotes collaboration as the cornerstone for technology-enabled improvement in government. This collaboration takes place in three different forms, that is, between public sector organizations from various levels and functional areas of the government; public and private sector organizations, and different systems of public administration, particularly those obtaining in the developing countries such as Zambia.

Seamless Government

Seamless Government is a set of agencies working together as a single entity, generating integrated responses to community or public needs. Seamless Government shows government agencies how to meet the needs of customers seamlessly, that is, in a smooth, effortless and responsive manner. It details a step-by-step approach to assess, design and implement significant changes in all levels of government, (Linden, 1998). Some of the benefits of collaboration in government are among others, the following; better sharing of information by agencies and departments; higher and effective utilization of resources; more engaged policy-making process, and more innovative public workforce.

Nonetheless, the most critical benefit of Seamless Government is the delivery of Seamless Services. Such services transcend the boundaries between functional areas and levels of government and offer the greatest benefits to clients (the Public). These services

are accessed through a one-stop portal and organized into clusters which allow clients to specify a need and obtain a service to fulfill that need without knowing which government agency or department or level of government should be contacted. In many situations, several agencies at different levels may be involved without the consumer of the service or good even being aware of that. For Instance, services related to Motor Vehicle Registration may including issuing an Interpol Clearance Certificate by the Police, Customs and excise duty clearance from Zambia Revenue Authority and Motor Vehicle Insurance from Zambia State Insurance Corporation. Although these services involve different agencies

, in Seamless Government, the applicant is able to access them as a single service through the one-stop government portal (which could be situated at Road Safety and Transport Agency), unaware which agencies are actually involved.

Seamless Service is a complete public service delivered collaboratively by several government agencies through a one-stop contact. From the customers' view point, a seamless Service is delivered by a single "Virtual" organization. Linden (1998) says that a Seamless Service is effortless service, for both the customer and the provider. Such a service is characterized by the words *fluid, integrated, connected* and *transparent*. Everything is obvious, and there are no surprises or hidden problems. In a seamless experience, the service provider has direct connection with the end user, who faces an absolute minimum forms, approvals, and steps, and with no runarounds or runabouts.

In the private sector, "One-Stop" shopping has become a popular approach for delivering seamless service today. For example the case of mega stores such as Game Stores, Pick N Pay, etc. In the future, we are likely to see many more examples of "no-stop" shopping, in which the end user accesses the information, service or product without having to stop anywhere, that is, from the user's home computer or mobile phone. Linden (1998), further states that organizations providing seamless service are characterized by the following features; "Right-to-left" thinking, that is, they begin with desired outcomes and work backwards to achieve those outcomes; walls that are replaced by networks – both human and electronic; simple and transparent processes that staff and customers find easy to use and interact with; multi-skilled individuals and work teams, and centralized information and decentralized operations.

Organizing along functional lines made sense in the industrial era, when a stable environment rewarded speed, flexibility, integration and partnerships with suppliers, customers and other organizations. However, success in modern environment requires a focus on work processes, not on organizational functions and divisions. The traditional approach only tends to add to territory battles and slows down work processes. Work processes are not always obvious because most of the people have are trained to think about organizations in terms of organizational functions and divisions, not processes.

What then is a work process? A process is a series of activities which are subdivided into tasks that create value for the customers by transforming inputs into valuable outputs. It can further be said to be a work process is a set of interrelated steps that begin with an input or trigger and end with an outcome that satisfies the end user, i.e. the outcome that the end user values. An Example of a process is that for issuing a passport which is composed of a set of activities; viz; submitting the application form and supporting documents, checking the application for completeness, making a decision about issuing or denying the passport, declining the passport and others. Each of these activities happens through a sequence of related tasks. The value created through the process is the passport issued based on the data and documents submitted by the applicant and any other information gathered.

There are two types of processes – *Core* and *Support*. *Core processes* are basically those that end up touching an external customer; they occur when an employee, for example, fills a customer's order, respond to a customer's complaints, or develop a new product or product or service. Core processes are the reason an organization exists. *Support processes* are internally focused, such as recruiting, hiring and training of new employees. Support processes such as budgeting, hiring and making payments are necessary, but they are not the main stay of our agencies. Support processes enable the mission-oriented units to do their work.

The organizations exist to satisfy some external, public need, not to process employee payroll, purchase items for staff, or hire and evaluate them. The agency's external purpose is accomplished by core processes. But why do organizations spend so much time redesigning support processes? There are basically two reasons: First, Seamless service will never be achieved if employees are forced to deal with rigid, bureaucratic internal processes and systems. This is because employees need less supervision and monitoring from their superiors on their every movement. However, they need help from systems and support staff members who provide information and responses needed in the discharge of their tasks. The second reason to redesign support processes is that doing so sends a very important signal to employees – that is that, the change effort is going to benefit them and not hurt them, (Linden, 1998).

People - A Factor in Seamless Government

One Key success factor for implementing Seamless Government is bringing people from the public sector on-board. E-Government programs have an enormous impact upon staff in terms of what they do, how, when and where they do it. As result, the expectations, fears, interests, resilience, and perceptions raised by E-Government solutions and felt by civil servants must be addressed proactively. For example, a common concern among

public employees is that the increased efficiency underlined in the E-Government will result in job cuts.

Such fears must be properly addressed and two related lines of action are required; on one hand, employees and their representative unions must be involved in change management and on the other, the required skills for implementing and operating E-Government solutions must be identified and provided to civil servants through specially designed programs.

Skills Requirement for Seamless Government

Regarding these required skills; The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) considers four sets of skills as being critical: (1) *Information Technology (IT)* – this includes IT literacy and technical skills to design elements of E-Government such as hardware, software and networks. For example being able to develop an ICT architect and auditing the adequacy of existing solutions. (2) *Information Management (IM)* – which includes skills and knowledge for the deployment of knowledge resources within an administration, and the sharing of knowledge with partners? For example, being able to understand the agency's needs; designing the strategy for information management; and designing programs for employees and end users. (3) *Information Society (IS)* – this includes abilities to use ICT resources to implement an E-Government strategy coherent with the agency's overall strategy. For instance, relationship management requires being able to ensure the agency responds to customer needs, establish lasting relationships with ICT suppliers and specialists, identify sources of cooperation with partners and establish good governance principles. (4) *Management* – This includes the skills required to meet new organizational needs, such as being able to manage organizational change, improve customer responsiveness, develop accountability frameworks, create incentives for cooperation and collaboration and manage relationship with the private sector.

Benefits of Seamless Government

Linden (1998) identifies several benefits that governments and public organizations may derive by moving to seamless service. He states that moving to seamless service provides many opportunities for employees and government's other numerous stakeholders. These include among others: improvement in customer service and customer satisfaction of the citizens; Reduction in cycle times, which would lead to faster and quicker service, less waste, less downtime (high productivity) and better collaboration with various

stakeholders; Reduction in costs; higher quality of goods and services; highly motivated staff as jobs become more interesting and greater integration (vertically and horizontally) of work units or departments. He further states that seamless service would create closer connections between employees and other stakeholders which would lead to greater public confidence in governmental institutions. This confidence would in turn lead to greater support for those institutions and their missions.

Challenges

Traditionally, government agencies are structured to follow the hierarchical management structure which consists of three levels: (1) Strategic Management - responsible for making strategic decisions, (2) Tactical management – responsible for managing basic functions, and (3) Operational Staff – responsible for carrying out the basic tasks.

In these structures, information flows up through the chain of command and is processed at each level, while commands are transmitted down the hierarchy. Each level therefore, has its own level of control and different information needs. This tradition structure demonstrates that there is high dependence on middle management(tactical management) since managers at this level are responsible for processing internal vertical information flow and for controlling and coordinating business activities of government. As a result, middle management tends to be; (1) large and overstaffed, (2) Structurally rigid due to the centralization of decision making, (3) Lacks flexibility, and (4) Slow to respond to changes in the environment. Further challenges include; having the same people who succeeded in the old approach lead the change and staffing the key teams or units and roles with people who are neither committed to the major change nor are willing to learn new ways of doing things.

Therefore, government institutions require structural transformation in order to implement change in the operations of government to attain the seamless service for the citizens, particularly in the developing countries where structural rigidities and political interference in service delivery are the norm and not the exception.

Way Forward

However, in order to create Seamless Government, certain changes in government structure must occur through the use of ICT. These changes include but not limited to decentralizing decision making so that decisions are made at the location close to where the activity is taking place, structures must evolve from hierarchical to flat networks and society entities must be connected to share information and communicate with one another. Implementing organizational changes requires a rigorous approach so as to ensure the effectiveness of the desired changes and guarantee that no undesired side

effects of the changes are introduced into the organization as well as providing strategies for managing resistance to change.

In conclusion, it can be said that change management is critical to creating seamless government and seamless service thereof. Change management is one approach for managing the “people-side” of change, and its composed of several steps, viz; (Kotter, 1996); establishing a sense of urgency; creating the guiding coalition; developing a vision and strategy; communicating the change vision; empowering employees for action; creating short-term wins or gains; consolidating gains and producing more change; and anchoring new approaches in the culture. The first four steps enable to defrost the hardened status quo maintained by organizations; the next three steps enable the introduction of new practices in the organization and the last step freezes the organization and enables the changes introduced to be grounded on the organization culture. If and when this change management steps are adapted and adopted to the public sector, we would begin to see the public sector being proactive in the provision of goods and services to attain efficiency and effectiveness.

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