**Government digitization – What needs to be done**

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In the previous article, we discussed why we need to digitalize government transactions. This time we will try to explore how to do this. It is worth mentioning first, the reason why most such efforts fail.

Most governments approach digitalization (similar to but broader, than digitization) from the top-down, and the inside out. Meaning, first develop a strategy, second, mandate a committee or agency to implement it. By themselves, these steps are valid and necessary.

The reason they usually fail, however, is that they become mired in the internal political economy of inter-agency (or even intra-agency) turf battles. Rather than simplifying to make life easier for businesses or citizens, functionaries try to adapt technological platforms to their complex, often outdated back office protocols. Projects descend into a black hole of eternal customization, development, and spending, rarely to emerge with anything recognizably simple to the outside world.

In recent years, some groups have taken matters into their own hands. A handful of experiences internationally have begun from the outside in, by asking government stakeholders to answer seven simple questions:

1. Where do I have to go?

2. What do I have to provide?

3. What will I get at this step?

4. How long does it take?

5. How much does it cost?

6. What regulation justifies this step?

7. Who can I complain to in case of a problem?

Clarifying the answers to these questions, in itself no easy task, is the first step in developing a user-friendly interface from government to business, or government to citizen. Even more importantly, the answers should be somewhat consistent across agencies and types of administrative procedures – so that the individual does not have to re-learn the drill, whether in person on online, each time they interact with the government online.

The current ‘Digital Pakistan” strategy is an admirable document with a broad vision. It states that one of the key goals of it is to create a digital ecosystem with “infrastructure and institutional frameworks for the rapid delivery of innovative digital services, applications and content.However, as the old McKinsey adage goes “Strategy is what you don’t do.” A good strategy, in other words, helps focus resources on consistent and achievable goals in the short term, and avoids the “peanut butter” approach (spreading the work, and this the results, too thinly).

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Contrary to common wisdom, changes in mindset are consequences of, rather than the cause of, a successful implementation. Successful change processes start with points that are easy to agree Common sense “obvious decisions” can be made by holding up evidence. For example “currently, a citizen must pay the government in five different moments, methods, and places, to obtain one license. Do we agree this is not ideal?” smart facilitators push towards agreement on principles, but do not rush action. Better to work through the tiny details of how that five-part fee will be properly divided and distributed to its recipients before attempting to mandate a change in the payment process.

Last, the approach needs a little tweaking. We have to provide an answer to the seven questions mentioned above. But the answers would be catering three different segments of people (1) for people who have reliable internet access, (2) for people who have only certain types of access at certain times, and (3) for people who don’t have any access at all. This is totally achievable and there are international examples of kiosks, local business licenses to serve as government “intermediaries” etc. that can be tapped to ensure that the most remote rural areas and marginalize populations have the same level of consistency and user friendly service, even if it’s not 100% online.

Digital penetration in Pakistan stands at 35 percent in according to a recent report. That excludes a major chunk of the population. On the other hand, there are about 166 million mobile phone users here, taking the teledensity to around 78 percent. About half of these users i.e. 80 million or 37.70 have 3G/4G subscriptions. Creating a Digital ID connected to one’s telephone number might be a good way to start.

The websites and/or applications should have extremely easy to use interfaces with ‘tabs’ and ‘menu’ having logical flows – associated to real life events. The government may think of having a single large platform that integrates information from all other departments, providing everything under one virtual roof.

Going for full-scale digitization at once may be unrealistically ambitious; however, it is clear that accepting the status-quo is equally unacceptable. The best way is to go for experimentation, start at a small scale, measure results, and identify room for improvement. We can begin with pilot projects in cities and even parts of a certain city.

Digitizing a government need not require sophisticated technologies or building expensive new IT infrastructure. The functionality needed to serve citizens and businesses efficiently is relatively simple. As we saw above the process begins with a smart change management strategy, and a savvy approach to business process reengineering. The seven questions in the beginning may provide us with a good head start.

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