

The e-government program of Saudi Arabia

Advantages and challenges

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report discusses the advantages and challenges facing the Saudi government in implementing the electronic government program. As the technology advances and grows, governments all over the world attempt to take advantage of such technology to provide their citizens with the best possible services. The Saudi Arabian government is no exception and has realized the importance of electronic communication (internet) in providing adequate efficient Public services, and it's working hard to catch up with the rest of the world.

The purpose of this report is to examine the existing efforts of implementing electronic government in Saudi Arabia. To fulfill the objective of the study, SWOT analysis will be used as a methodology. The study then reports the findings and concludes with some recommendations that might enhance the program's abilities and increase its effectiveness and usefulness to all residents of Saudi Arabia.

The study will start with a brief discussion on E-Government and presents background information. Afterward, the report explores the advantages of e-government. Next, the challenges facing Saudi government are magnified and discussed extensively. Finally, a proposal of some recommended acts to improve the program.

II. WHAT IS E-GOVERNMENT?

In a dynamic world we live in, we face new challenges and opportunities. The base of change is fast beyond imagination. People and governments are pressured to work harder and smarter and more importantly faster and efficiently to meet the ever increasing demand and needs. All societies have to deal with forces of change in their environment. One major force that we need to reckon with is communication technologies. Such technology is changing everyday, if not by the minute and therefore, it's very hard and expensive to keep up with it. However, governments in the developing countries have taken the initiative to benefit from the electronic communication in its national development efforts. But what is e-government? It means basically "*the use of internet in the public sector*".

The nature of government decision making process encompasses several parties and political players such as the general public, businesses, not for profit organization, interest group, and other government agencies. The e-government project targets all of them. Therefore, e-government includes three major parts:

- Government with general public: The relationship between the government and citizens delivering services and facilitating the democratic practice.
- Government with businesses: The transactions opposed by the government that could be fulfilled by through the internet are of a great deal to businesses. In addition, e-procurement is one of a high reliance these days. As a result, businesses engage strongly in the e-government application.
- Government with government: The inter-governmental electronic applications are a must these days. E-government provides a strong infrastructure for different government agencies to communicate and share information.

The e-government is a technology, as all technologies, it has advantages and disadvantages. The next section will explore some advantages of implementing this technology in Saudi Arabia.

III. E-GOVERNMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

"YESSER" is the Arabic word for simplify and the name of Saudi Arabia's e-government program. The vision statement of the program is: "By the end of 2010, everyone in the kingdom will be able to enjoy – from anywhere and at anytime – world class government services offered in a seamless, user friendly and secure way by utilizing a variety of electronic means". This is a powerful statement, is Saudi are able to translate that into action remain to be seen. It seems that the implementation of the e-government program is noticeably late. However, some Saudi official thinks that starting late is not always a disadvantage. They claim that YESSER program would have one of the best infrastructures in the world.

At the present, the argument must not be whether we are having a late start or not, but will Saudi e-government program realize the advantages and challenges a head. It is also necessary to examine other countries projects in the field in order to benefit from their experiences.

A. Advantages of E-government in Saudi Arabia

1. Government agencies benefit

When talking about government agencies, we have to visualize the huge amount of communications going on between different agencies and the enormous costs associated with that. With the use of the e-government tool, we can reduce these costs dramatically. In a study conducted by the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) in 2003, it indicated that about 63% of government online programs surveyed are achieving cost reductions. The overall estimated reductions in costs were about \$100 million from surveyed programs. Using the information technology tools, like e-mails, intranets and the internet, will certainly have a heavy impact in reducing costs of communications.

Another major benefit to government agencies is a general improve in services provided to individuals, including citizens, businesses and other government organizations.

2. Individual Economic Benefits

Nowadays, the time factor is a very important consideration to individuals. We are much more concern about "how long" than "how good" most of the time. Thanks to e-government, the time element is perceived as a major advantage to it. With the aid of e-government, there will be a 24 hour service through agencies websites. In addition, these services are provided on the basis of self-serve, therefore people can access information faster and easier. Another advantage would be the existence of electronic search engines which makes it almost effortless to find information. As a final point, e-government expands the region of providing services to include people in rural areas.

3. International Trade Benefits

As the Saudi government proceed to as WTO member, it has to fulfill certain conditions. One is the e-government matter. In the United Nations' Global E-Government Readiness Report 2005, Saudi was ranked 80th out of the UN's 191 member states. In order to be higher in the rank, Saudi government has been accelerating its efforts to provide a world-class electronic infrastructure. From that date tell now, we are seeing a much enhanced quality internet services.

4. Democratic reforms

Without a doubt, the use of the e-government technology is going to open up the way for an enormous amount of information flowing in to the public. The information may include government policies, archival and historical information, and some useful statistics. This, in turn, will contribute more and more to government transparency.

B. Challenges facing "YESSER"

Many critics argue that the concept of e-government is not feasible. Some of them stresses that online transactional systems are of an extremely low usage levels. Others say that the advantages of e-government are limited to businesses rather than citizens. In addition, the high amount of money associated with implementation. All these and others, makes the perception to this tool go down. However, we will narrow our focus to the issues related particularly to Saudi Arabia and its culture.

1. Accountability Problem

In most of developing countries, the problem of accountability arises from the absence of monitoring agencies. It is not completely different in Saudi Arabia. As you walk into any government agency you will notice the lack professional work. In addition, the courtesy issue is spreading allover the place. That is why king Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz ordered the establishment of Control and Investigation Board to resolve these and other problems.

2. Rules and Regulation Problem

One challenging concern is the rules and regulations of government agencies. Many of these regulations are complex and of a centralized basis. To solve the problem, we have to restructure the rules and regulations to achieve more democratic and transparent transactions.

3. Qualified Staff

In order to run the e-government program effectively and efficiently, we need to have qualified teams to perform the task. To do so, there has to be highly training programs for the employees and a lot of IT specialists.

4. Internet Usage

One of the difficulties that the Saudi Government could face in establishing e-government in the country from corner to corner is that internet usage across the Kingdom is very low. According to Fahad Al Hoymany, Minister's advisor for IT and head of the e-government infrastructure department at the Saudi Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), currently just 13 to 15% of the population actually uses the internet.

IV. CONCLUSION

As the Saudi government moving toward the implementation of e-government, it is useful to realize that the process requires a sustained commitment of political will, resources and engagement among the government, private and public sectors. However, if e-government practitioners take care of technical requirements, they potentially can develop a system of e-government that not only makes current government practices more efficient, but also transforms the very relationship between the public, the private sector and government.

By promoting the larger goals of society and making government more responsive to its citizens, e-government can be a powerful tool in improving a nation's quality of life. It is essential to take a user-centered approach as a guideline to the implementation of e-government program. That is, to understand the needs and requirements of the people when building up and processing the technology.

In means of sharing, it is useful to the government to collaborate with the community in the process of designing. That could be done by producing prototypes of the intended design and receiving feedback from general public.

Because the e-government tool is heavily dependent on IT specialists, it is wise to start training people to able to start practicing their future jobs as soon as the project is completed.

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