THE OECD PROJECT ON THE IMPACT OF E-GOVERNMENT:
REALIGNING GOVERNANCE

Vision, Context and Responsiveness

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This discussion paper is based on the executive summary of the document "Realigning Governance: From E-Government to E-Democracy" [PUMA/RD(2002)2]. The author, Mr. Donald G. Lenihan, Director, Centre for Collaborative Government, will make a presentation of his paper at the Committee meeting under agenda item 10 of the Provisional Annotated Agenda.

For further information, please contact Edwin Lau, Tel: (33-1) 45 24 80 36; E-mail: edwin.lau@oecd.org
Questions for the Committee

The following discussion paper provides a summary of a paper that was presented at the first OECD E-Government Seminar, 11-12 March 2002. In discussing the paper, Committee members are invited to keep in mind some of the following questions:

1) In your experience, what are some of the barriers to achieving the type of “seamless” government envisaged in this paper?

2) What are the most important objectives for countries’ e-government initiatives?

3) What are some examples of how e-government has changed government structures or practices in your country? How has it changed the way citizens relate to government?

4) What are the ways in which you think that governments can better align their e-government, public service and management reform objectives in order to assist in the transformation of government?
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Introduction

1. What is e-government? For some, it means electronic access to government services. For others, it is about a new capacity to collect, integrate and use information, make it more available to the public, or use it to track broad societal changes, evaluate programs and improve the effectiveness of government. For others still, it has a larger, governance dimension: it is about using information and communications technologies (ICTs) to expand public space so that citizens and stakeholders can become more direct or frequent participants in government business.

2. Only a few years ago, e-government enthusiasts predicted a new era in government. Today they are less ebullient. It is proving far more difficult and costly than first thought. The much vaunted “efficiency gains” have been slow to materialize – as has the predicted boom in e-commerce. Then there is the sheer complexity of the task. For reasons such as these, e-government is threatening to stall. What can be done?

3. The exaggerated expectations of the recent past leaned too heavily on the quick fix of “easy wins” in online service delivery and on misleading analogies with the private sector. Such accounts failed to do justice to the scope of the transformation implied by e-government or the complexity of the task. E-government is a tool to achieve policy goals rather than an objective in its own sake, but its realisation has the potential to help governments launch some real transformations of how they do business and how they relate with citizens.

4. If the challenges are to be met – and there is every reason to believe that they can be met – at least two prior conditions must be fulfilled. First, we need a clearer picture of e-government – a storyline that fills in the gaps in our thinking. We do not have one. Second, there must be committed, informed and engaged leadership. Providing such leadership may be the single biggest challenge on the horizon.

The Three Themes

5. A satisfactory storyline for e-government will take into account as many perspectives on it as are known, connecting them together where possible. As the Crossing Boundaries discussion in Canada has evolved over the last three years, these have settled into three major (though overlapping) themes:

- Improving Service Delivery:
- Information: A New Public Resource?
- E-Democracy: Extending Public Space

1. Improving Service Delivery

6. The goal of electronic service delivery is to achieve seamless client-centred service delivery. A decade ago, this involved using kiosks or websites where citizens could access some government services
through a single point. More recently, the idea has been expanded to imagine government as a single “electronic portal” through which all or most services are accessible. In this “channel,” related services would be “integrated” so that citizens would encounter government as a seamless whole.

7. Many OECD governments now have such projects under way. However, progress has been slow on the goal of integrating or clustering services. Integration requires coordination across divisions and departments that have their own vertical accountability requirements, different privacy rules, no standards to ensure interoperability and no history of working together. Moreover, integrating many “services” also requires a realignment of their policy goals.

8. Suppose that a disabled person wanted to use special government transportation services sponsored by one department so that he/she could report to a new job-training program for persons with disabilities, sponsored by another. From that person’s point of view, what burden would a commitment from governments to “integrate services around my needs” place on the two departments?

9. For example, if the person plans to use the services together as part of what appears to be different aspects of a single task – overall efforts to become more employable – should that person expect government to make them mesh? Suppose that the transportation service is available only after 9:00 AM but that the training course begins at 8:00 AM. As a client of both governments, should that person expect the services to be coordinated so that the van can be used to transport him/her to the course? How far are such programs supposed to be complementary?

10. Note that a consideration of issues such as whether the van is allowed to pick up the person at home before 8:00 AM pushes us beyond questions about how the service will be delivered. It raises questions about why the service exists, what it is supposed to achieve and who has access to it. Providing answers to such questions will launch us into a discussion of the policy goals behind the program.

11. As the example suggests, providing clients or citizens with what they regard as seamless service would often require much higher levels of coordination and cooperation between departments, governments and other service providers in the private and voluntary sectors than now exist. If governments really want e-government to reorganize services around citizens, they must recognize that seamless government is about far more than efficient or accessible service delivery. It also implies coordination at the policy level and, as such, is as much a policy vision as a service-delivery vision.

12. Seamless services, however, can also raise citizen concerns about the misuse of information and the blurring of frontiers between citizens’ private preferences, habits and activities and their public use of government services. How can governments gain or maintain citizens’ trust that personal data will not be misused and that seamless government will not lead to “big brother” type surveillance of citizens?

2. Information: A New Public Resource?

13. Although service delivery is one point of departure for the e-government story, it is not the only one. The new service delivery infrastructure creates far more than new plumbing. It also creates a dynamic and powerful new capacity to collect, create, integrate, share and store data and information, which we call the new information capacity.

14. This capacity promises to change what governments know about themselves and, indeed, the world. Taking it rather than service delivery as the point of departure for discussion sheds new light on e-
government, leading us to consider the role and value of information as a new public resource. From this viewpoint, e-government poses four strategic challenges:

**Make government a pre-eminent source of quality public information.**

15. Governments are vast repositories of information. In addition, their capacity to access and store new streams is increasing exponentially. As we move into the Information Age, they should liberate their information holdings, making them available and accessible to the public to support the needs of citizens, organizations and businesses. Indeed, many officials now regard the liberation of information as the next wave of e-government. Governments should become pre-eminent sources of public information in areas ranging from national history to health information to sustainable development.

**Make government “smarter.”**

16. ICTs could be used to collect, organize and integrate vast amounts of information to support far more effective assessments of how programs are performing and of their contribution to broad “societal” goals, such as a healthier population, a more productive economy or a more politically informed citizenry. The ultimate goal is to transform governments into learning organizations, that is, organizations that are able to learn from experience and that base their decision making on available evidence, as far as possible.

17. ICTs hold the potential to build learning capacity by gathering information in new ways for improved policy development and program evaluation. When used in conjunction with a performance focus, re-engineered processes, improved management and the right incentives, they can help organisations transform themselves.

**Make government more transparent and accountable.**

18. Meeting the previous challenge would lead to a vast increase in reliable information on the performance of government policies, programs and operations. If this information were made available to those charged with providing government oversight – such as MPs or commissioners – as well as to citizens and stakeholders, governments would be far more accountable and transparent.

**Make government information a PUBLIC resource.**

19. In command-and-control systems, centralized control over the flow of information is a key management lever. Knowledge is power. Modern governments have organized around this principle for two hundred years. As a result, they are hierarchical, secretive and controlling. Senior managers therefore will resist trends that reduce their control over the flow of information. It threatens to make their job far more difficult. We need to recognize that e-government is a different kind of system from the existing one. It is less controlling and more collaborative, less hierarchical and more horizontal. Making it work will require more than a change in management practices or organizational design. It will require a major change in culture.

3. **E-Democracy: Extending Public Space**

20. ICTs increase connectivity – across organizational boundaries and between governments and citizens. They could be used to extend public space in ways that might establish an ongoing “dialogue”
between citizens and their governments. Through this dialogue citizens and stakeholders might participate more directly in decision making – that is, in governance. It could contribute – perhaps very significantly – to revitalizing democracy and strengthening the legitimacy of government.

21. For example, the long-standing practice of assembling anonymous teams of officials to create major policy initiatives “behind closed doors” is already being criticized as too “elitist.” Such processes are likely to be the target of even fiercer criticism in future.

22. The Internet creates a huge opportunity to change the way policy is made by directly involving citizens in such discussions. New online discussion forums could allow citizens to engage one another, as well as their elected representatives and, perhaps, public officials, on key topics, such as health care reform or international trade negotiations. Pressure to use it for such purposes is likely to grow. But new technologies do not automatically solve such long-standing problems as citizen apathy, distrust in government and competition with other pursuits for citizens’ time and attention.

23. Using ICTs to increase citizen involvement in governance also raises other issues. For example, how might such processes affect the traditional role of elected representatives? What would happen, for example, if the views expressed by citizens conflicted with those that an elected government took to be essential to its electoral mandate? How much time do citizens have to participate in such processes? Might they be taken over by special-interest groups claiming to represent citizens? How could this be avoided? Is there a threat of too much “direct democracy” leading to bad governance or a “tyranny of the majority”? What implications might there be for those who are unable or unwilling to participate in the new electronic relationship?

Conclusion: The Overall Impact of E-Government

24. E-government is different from conventional government. First, it is more horizontally organized. Secondly, it involves a shift from a more closed to a more open system. In a closed system, information and decision making are hierarchically controlled. Contact with influences outside the system (government) is monitored and limited. This is essential to command-and-control systems.

25. By contrast, e-government produces a wide range of new and often informal connections between government officials and organizations or individuals outside their usual organizational boundaries. This changes the way information enters and flows around the system and introduces new – and often uncontrollable – influences into decision making.

26. Overall, e-government weakens conventional command and control structures – especially those based on the control of information. It shifts government toward an organizational model that is more collaborative in style and in which decision making is more deconcentrated. This raises many questions about how far governments want to go in this direction and how fast, as well as about the tools and options available for managing such a change strategically.