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Introducing an infrastructure for joined-up-government in local public administration: a West Lothian case study

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Abstract

This paper analyses some first steps towards joining-up-government and creating an Information Society at a local level. It presents a case study from West Lothian, Scotland of early steps towards a joined-up technological and organisational infrastructure shared by all public administrations serving the area. Using Molina's sociotechnical constituency approach, it explores how the goals of improving services, deploying information and communications technologies and joining-up government integrate with to ecommerce, eworking and tele-democracy.

The paper shows the implementation of the Information Society by local public administrations to be evolutionary processes of sociotechnical constituency building. It discusses the relevance of the West Lothian case study for current theoretical debate, public policies and research programmes, and provides a practical checklist of points for practitioners of the Information Society at a local level. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

This story is about civic entrepreneurship; it charts the struggle of pioneers from a public administration, in circumstances of adversity, to begin converting the mantra of joined-up-government in a reality. It is a story of West Lothian Council in Scotland who's award winning web site and platform for joined-up-government are now recognised as a best practice.

The innovation and subsequent diffusion of many technologies is constrained by the social circumstances into which they are born and attempt to flourish. Put simply new technologies and new ways of working are often stifled by old social structures, rules

and old ways of working. This is especially true of networked technologies where the adaptation of new uses by a variety of organisations and individuals can multiply the difficulties of agreeing a settled shape for the use of a new technology. Additionally, a 'catch-22' dilemma can occur. Since the value of adopting a network technology increases as the size of the network grows, hitting 'take-off' level of adoption is inhibited by the low rates of adoption (Who bought the first faxes—and why?). These issues are currently being sharply posed in networked computing. Since many of the beneficial innovations are now in communications rather than computer power, the issues posed by innovation are more social than technological. Barriers to the innovation of networked technologies often feature complex re-alignments: of heterogeneous databases, diverse systems and the negotiation of new business processes between and within organisations.

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Introducing networked technologies into networked organisations can therefore be a process fraught with difficulty. This is especially so where governances (professional and cultural) vary within and between the innovating organisations; where targeted users are vulnerable and often ill-equipped with skills; where there is a heritage of mistrust and competition resulting in strong inter-organisational barriers and where public access has to be inclusive. Each of these problems confronts the local public sector as it takes up the challenge of joining-up-government.

The substructure of the Information Society is the generalised use of low cost and accessible data and information, its gathering, storage, manipulation and retrieval and its later purposive use in the form of knowledge to improve the quality of life of citizens via the provision of products and services HMSO (1999). These improvements may take the form of new ways of consultation by decision-takers (tele-democracy), support new ways of working and new products (e-services) and/or digital methods of search, assessment and transacting purchases (e-commerce). Digital inter or intra-relationships emerging in the Information Society are business-to-business or public administration to public administration (B2B or PA2PA), organisation to customer/citizen (B2C or PA2C), or cross-institutional relations (for example, B2PA or PA2B). Public administration (PA) here means statutory-based, publicly owned and funded service providers with a local remit. Tele-working here is employed as an overarching term covering tele-democracy, e-commerce and e-services.

Using a case study from West Lothian, Scotland, this paper analyses the early stages of joining-up-government and the actions of 10 local public administrations (PAs) to install a common information and communications technology (ICT) platform for all public service delivery in the county of West Lothian. Converting the slogan 'joined-up-government' into a practical reality is shown to be an evolutionary process, likely to bear fruit for service users over the medium rather than short-term (5 years not one).

The main conceptual instrument employed in this paper is Molina's (for example, Molina, 1993, 1997) sociotechnical constituency approach. His diamond of alignment structures the paper and acts as an analytical instrument. This paper's contribution is to offer a good practice example to policy practitioners

of joined-up-government and summary of policy issues for innovators. Teubal (1995) distinction between horizontal and vertical implementation strategies for proven and emerging technologies is considered. It is argued that these alternatives may be phases of implementation rather than alternatives.

The paper illustrates the interconnections between joined-up-government (JUG) strategies and other important strategies such as electronic delivery of services and ICT-related local employment planning. It shows that the benefits of an infrastructure for JUG lie in the potential to eliminate inter-organisational boundaries and to eradicate fragmentation within business processes of service delivery, in short to act as learning organisations. To provoke insightful innovation the paper proposes a new rule for PA ICT innovators. This rule states that to effectively place an 'e' before a PA activity, the activity itself will require re-engineering.

This paper conceptualises PAs as networked organisations for whom innovation requires partnership with the private and third sectors, a contrary view to earlier models that view PAs as autonomous entities. Literature from human relations referencing the position of professional groups faced with technology and organisational change (Kerr et al., 1977; Clark, 1993) are shown to be of continued relevance. New approaches to governance in complex organisations (Hollingsworth et al., 1994; Armstrong and Bulmer, 1998; Pratchett, 1999) are shown as critical to understanding the transition of local PAs from autonomous (often competitive) organisations towards networked organisations. In the latter flows of value and knowledge between organisations are more important for service users than organisational integrity. The paper draws upon supply logistics literature (Lamming, 1993; Rackham et al., 1996) to demonstrate the importance of partnering to innovation of ICTs by PAs, stressing the importance of partner choice and user-shaped innovation. Referring to Hill (1993) notion of technology choice, this paper introduces the idea of technology-mix meaning a particular configuration of technological platforms aligned to each other and to a set of target problems in order to support an intended solution.

The paper discusses these points of theory using a case study from West Lothian. This is action research, in that the author is an actor in the proceedings, in

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