

PR 5423 Electronic culture essential today Citizen-friendly public service through e-governance

By Professor R. P. Gunawardane

Information and communication technologies have changed the life style of people all over the world. The world at present is moving rapidly towards "knowledge society" making maximum use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Globalization and the advancement of science and technology, particularly ICT, have led to intense international competition demanding the maintenance of high standard of quality of goods and services. This new environment prompted most governments to move towards deregulation, liberalization and privatisation with open markets. All these changes have necessitated extensive reforms of the public service in order to function effectively in the new dynamic environment.

In order to respond to these increasingly challenging business environments and to satisfy highly demanding clientele more efficient system of governance has to be evolved. Most of the countries in the world — both developing as well as developed have embarked on a more efficient and transparent Electronic Governance to satisfy the current needs of their citizens.

E-government solutions are internet-based and all transactions between citizen and government, business and government and government to government should be entirely by electronic means. The aim of e-governance is to ensure simple, moral, accountable, responsive, transparent and efficient (SMARTER) governance. Effective implementation of e-governance will certainly lead to a smart government.

Electronic governance, undoubtedly has special significance in Sri Lanka, if we intend to improve the efficiency of state services considerably. It is envisaged that the introduction of e-governance will not only lead to increased efficiency, but also remove most of the red tape and bottlenecks in the provision of government services. It is the innovative and novel approaches in the use of ICT that can help Sri Lanka to emerge out of her present crisis and become a prosperous and well-governed country in the new millennium.

Latecomer, to IT

Sri Lanka being a latecomer to IT, could learn from experiences of Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and Indian states such as Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. In fact, late comers to

IT have an advantage. They can avoid the mistakes of the pioneers and leap frog into most modern cost effective techniques.

Singapore being a small island city, e-governance is strongly established and through e-governance Singapore government provides very efficient services to the people. There are a number of novel activities initiated by Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines to promote e-governance. In India, there is a healthy competition to introduce e-governance in various states with Andhra Pradesh leading in front with its dynamic Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu. India is also well ahead of other countries with regard to enactment of cyber laws.

In Sri Lanka utilisation of IT in the state sector is increasing gradually at the present time. It is evident that IT systems have been developed at the initiative of individual officers, but no well organized action plan had been initiated by the government to computerize state sector activities and services. Although some departments and a few Ministries have established e-mail, connectivity to internet, LAN/Intranet, partial computerization of certain services, etc. the computerization or the use of ICT in public service is lagging behind in Sri Lanka. Thus, there is an urgent need to introduce electronic culture through e-governance to our public sector.

First official level initiative for e-governance in Sri Lanka came from the former Ministry of Higher Education and Information Technology Development in early 2001. A programme aimed at introducing electronic culture was implemented through the Council for Information Technology (CINTEC). The Ministries and Institutions were requested to establish e-mail connections, websites and LANs and for this purpose technical assistance and guidance were provided by the CINTEC. This programme was highly successful and within about 6 months more than 50% of the Ministries established their e-mail connections and websites.

National Task Force

It is absolutely necessary to continue this initiative and develop a well formulated action plan to introduce e-governance to public sector setting out time targets. It is also necessary to allocate adequate resources for this purpose either from the treasury funds or through foreign donor agencies on priority basis. Initially, at least 3% of the budgetary allocation for each

Ministry/Institution should be earmarked for e-governance and IT infrastructure as practiced in some Indian states.

Furthermore, a strong political commitment is also essential for the successful implementation of e-governance in Sri Lanka. This is necessary in order to bring a change in the mindset of general public, public servants and business community who have been accustomed to work in the traditional mode. A strong political leadership is required to drive this process forward and for effective introduction of electronic culture to our public service.

Once the policy is declared and an action plan with time targets are worked out it is desirable to establish a National Task Force for e-governance, perhaps at the Prime Minister's Office to oversee and monitor the progress of this important programme. If the basic steps of such a programme can be worked out, logistics and appropriate mechanisms in place within the first 100 days, Sri Lanka can be converted into a Cyber Island with government on-line within 1000 days.

The action plan for introduction of e-governance in the state sector should include the following with definite time targets for implementation. Simultaneously, a survey has to be undertaken to determine the present status of IT usage in the state sector, in order to provide guidance and specific instructions to each Ministry/Institution.

Action plan

- (1) All Ministries, Departments and Institutions to have e-mail, internet connectivity and websites within 3 months.
- (2) Establishment of Local Area Networks (LAN) and development of suitable software packages for specific services of the institutions.
- (3) Create and maintain up-to-date database in electronic form in each Department/Ministry/Institution.
- (4) Computerization of financial administration with the use of specific software for procurement and tender procedures.
- (5) Extensive programme should be launched to enhance IT literacy among public officers. Pre-service and in-service training should be given in IT for all public servants.
- (6) Making it compulsory for officers to communicate with each other through e-mail. Circular instructions, notices and messages should be sent electronically.

(7) All advertisements for vacancies (recruitments), application procedures and calling of tenders should be available on-line.

(8) All important state regulations, circular instructions, Acts, notices, etc. should be made available through internet (government on line).

(9) All the banks and other financial institutions should be asked to interlink and establish a common banking network with common ATM facilities to account holders.

(10) Computerization process should be completed within the next two years giving high priority to (i) Immigration and emigration, passport issues; (ii) Imports, exports and custom procedures; (iii) Income tax and all other local taxes; (iv) All licensing procedures; (v) All registrations, national identity cards, birth, death, marriage certificates; (vi) Police Department & criminal records; (vii) Employment exchange; (viii) External Resources Department with links to all foreign donor projects; (ix) National health information & health records.

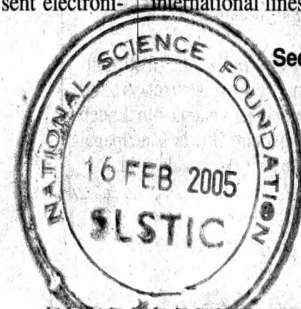
A national education information network has already been launched by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Education and Cultural Affairs recently. It is expected that the other sectors also will follow this example and establish similar data banks and information networks. After the successful implementation of e-governance project, all the services in the state sector should be available on-line.

It is also necessary to stress the importance of framing cyber legislation in Sri Lanka, while we embark on this ambitious project on e-governance.

Constraints

Lack of adequate infrastructure and the problems associated with connectivity and access are considered as major constraints for the establishment of e-governance in Sri Lanka.

High capacity and efficient telecommunication service at a reasonable price is a key to promote IT usage in governance and business. Current telecommunication capacity for connectivity and data exchange is grossly inadequate to meet the ever increasing demand. Thus, the highest priority should be given to enhance the capacity and speed of telecommunication lines. Accelerated programme should be launched to enhance the bandwidth for national and international lines and for extension of



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cover fibre optic and wireless linkages. Telecom market should be opened up allowing competition among providers, which will certainly benefit customers leading to increased access.

It is absolutely essential for ordinary masses, particularly rural poor to have access to IT facilities at a reasonable price. For this it is necessary to establish an islandwide network of Community Telecentres, perhaps in collaboration with the private sector.

For instance, in India and in some Newly Industrialized Countries IT has been popularised and brought to ordinary citizens through e-community centres, information kiosks, public call offices, etc. In Andhra Pradesh citizen-friendly services are offered under one roof through Information Kiosks where people can pay their taxes, water and electricity bills, collect certificates of birth, vehicle & other licences and even download application forms of state institutions and universities. In South Korea access to internet has been provided to farmers in remote villages through mobile units (buses fitted with computers) with instructors.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka an islandwide network of multipurpose telecentres may be established using available computer centres and with private sector participation wherever necessary. School system, the Open University, Technical education institutes and Teacher training institutes have a large number of computer resource centres distributed all throughout the island. In addition, quite a number of computer training centres have been established in various cities by the private sector. Some of these computer centres may be identified for upgrading to Multipurpose Telecentres to provide citizen services. These centres can be converted to self-financing institutions run jointly by state/local authorities and NGOs/private sector.

Such a network of telecentres would be of utmost importance in serving as e-governance outlets providing IT services to masses at a nominal fee. Some of these centres may play a dual role as training institutes and service providers. By this way access to IT services

can be expanded considerably to cover the whole island. Initially at least one such fully equipped centre should be established in each district and later satellite centres at the village level may also be established depending on the demand.

Through such an extensive programme IT can be taken to the rural masses. Then IT will certainly become a mode for empowerment of common masses, particularly rural poor.

Benefits

With e-governance firmly in place, it is expected that the public sector will be more effective, efficient, productive, transparent and user-friendly. E-governance will eventually lead to a greater demand for human resource development in IT. Hence it will help in expanding the IT education and training in the country allowing more opportunities for skill development in IT. With the implementation of e-governance there will be a great demand for software and hardware, which will undoubtedly promote IT industry in Sri Lanka. This also will facilitate rapid expansion of e-business, e-commerce and e-banking in the country. All these developments coupled with a strong political commitment will enable Sri Lanka to be an Intelligent Cyber Island perhaps within "one thousand days".

It must be stated that ICT is Sri Lanka's future. In the utilization of ICT in governance, innovative approaches are, in fact, needed to adopt a suitable and appropriate procedure and mechanisms to suit Sri Lankan needs.

However, it should be noted that good governance will not automatically evolve out of e-governance. The public service should be humane and be responsive to the needs of the citizen. Customer satisfaction is considered as the key to success of any business or government organization. Therefore, all procedures should be simplified while we proceed towards paper-less electronic-based governance. Apart from going electronic, other reforms and re-structuring of public service including human aspects such as improving service conditions should also be undertaken concurrently to enable our public service to function effectively and efficiently within the present dynamic environment.

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