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E-government success depends on external expertise

Author: [Ian Grant](#)
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Governments and their citizens across Europe are disillusioned with e-government. Despite 10 years of developing electronically delivered services, less than 10% of citizens use them regularly.

Governments face scepticism over the lack of transparency about how they use the information gathered from people using the systems. But independent initiatives seem more acceptable, research by Tech4i2, a UK firm that specialises in e-government, has revealed.

David Osimo, director of Tech4i2, said many of the present "Gov 2.0" projects gaining popularity were started by non-government people. "Government projects need to show that they protect people's privacy and security," he said, speaking at the European Network and Information Security Agency (Enisa) summer school.

Front office systems

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Most e-government projects are "back office" systems, which typically support regulation, cross-agency collaboration, knowledge management, interoperability, human resources and public procurement. Relatively few deal with "front office" activities, and those that do are seldom government initiatives, he said.

One such front office project in the US is Peer to Patent, a Columbia Law School project that enables people to register novel goods and have them peer-reviewed for originality before they are submitted to the US Patent Office.

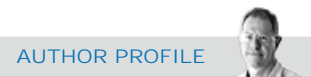
"The US patent system is broken," Osimo said. This is because searches for "prior art" took so long that the office simply let everything pass and let the patent holders dispute their rights in court. "Peer to Patent provides a cheaper and more certain way of registering and exploiting patentable products."

Risks and benefits

Osimo said Intellipedia, a wiki-based system that allows 16 US intelligence agencies to share and assess intelligence reports, has proved very effective. "There is a risk that you might share too much, but the director of the system says the benefits outweigh the risk."

Osimo said governments should reassess what controls they need in the light of the application and whether it resides inside or outside the corporate firewall.

Systems such as Intellipedia run inside the firewall. They have strong authentication of the participants and minimal internal control. "People are responsible for what they say," he said.



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[Patient Opinion](#), a feedback website for NHS patients, was started by an NHS general practitioner. It runs outside the NHS firewall. It required very little upfront authentication, but is strongly moderated. "You cannot have people calling a surgeon a butcher because you would be sued," Osimo said.

In practice, comments posted to the website have been surprisingly constructive, he said. Many people have thanked NHS staff for services received and are polite and happy to suggest solutions to problems they had come across, he said.

Keeping control

Osimo said governments need to accept that people will complain.

People are already posting photographs of shoddy cleaning in supposedly sterile hospital rooms on Flickr. "Once it's there, it's there forever," he said. "But if you had a trusted channel for complaints, people might use that instead of Flickr. That gives you some control over what happens next because it can lead to a dialogue. Flickr is a dead-end."

He said the key to e-government systems is to keep it simple to increase the possibility of uptake. Governments need not fear responses, he said. "Critical mass drives out the bad apples."

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