



## Book review

### Managing Electronic Services; A Public Sector Perspective

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The provision of local government information via the Internet did not lag far behind the commercial exploitation of the resource. Indeed, initiatives aimed at enhancing access to municipal activity were often the object of early information technology funding from national governments and the European Union. The Internet had characteristics which seemed in accordance with the principles of government. It was universally accessible (in principle), could be made available free at the point of service through existing outlets, for example, public libraries, leisure facilities and council offices and could also be updated frequently to follow the switchback of local politics. In this respect innovation was implicit in the design and on-going development of local government web sites and a large number of sites demonstrated this. Examples include the Welsh 'Pathway' site, Llwybr, with its use of XML to support powerful tools for accessing information and handling the complications of two languages on one site. Research into this context for web use has not been as extensive and has generally followed the success and failure of projects rather than setting out to drive them. In one respect, this book, *Managing Electronic Services: a public sector perspective* is no different since it is based entirely on imaginary case studies of local government authorities attempting to come to terms with pressures to be 'modern' in their delivery of public information, but also retaining their political priorities and the requirement to minimise costs. However, it is also a guide to web developers and provides, from an organisational perspective, a detailed commentary on potential pitfalls and pointers to avoiding them.

The book is within Springer's 'Practitioner' series and is highly practical, even though it is dealing with fundamental organisational issues and web information as an agent of change. The very brief bibliography is evidence of this and there is virtually no attempt to support statements with the view of other authors. It would seem to know its audience and its aim is to 'shorten and ease the road to professional electronic service provision'. It is a product of research within the European Union's Telematics Applications Programme and makes frequent reference in the imaginary cases to EU funding as a source of initiative and momentum in web development. Its Preface and Introduction do not provide a particularly promising start in this respect since the definition of 'public sector' is very limited. Local government is

the only type of public sector agency being discussed and 'cities' is the term used to cover the environment of the likely readership. There is an implicitly slightly wider definition of cities than that of very large metropolitan conurbations, but the imaginary cases which provide the 'soap' and 'analysis' threads through the text are all urban. At an advanced point in the text, a fundamental premise is stated, 'Electronic services are not products or services. They are service processes'. This may well be true, but the book up until that point and after it, discusses web site products almost as much as the process of achieving them. This is not a significant inconsistency, but stands out as an apparent, although brief contradiction. However, it may explain why the user and user needs only appear as a relatively late 'challenge'. Nevertheless, the case studies which are a constant source of examples and summaries are important and the central case of Tapville is compulsive, as a good soap should be.

The book is aimed at information system practitioners in local government, politicians, middle managers and consultants. This is reflected in the range of examples provided throughout the 'challenges' which define the chapters in the main part of the text. These all have a Scandinavian or North American flavour, but their generic qualities will be familiar to readers for whom local government is a work environment rather than the object of close philosophical scrutiny. Discovery of grammatical errors in the early pages is fortunately short-lived and although some proof-reading glitches appear later on (some rather amusing), it is generally straightforward to read. The involvement of contributors other than the author is stated bibliographically, but not identified within the text.

Overall, this book is very suitable for its intended market. Its summarised conclusions include a lot of salient points which reveal the distinction between a traditional steering group/editorial board approach to information system content and the broader organisational involvement required with a pervasive information source such as the Internet. Even the inevitable truisms are of the sort which decision makers need to be reminded of. It contains an enormous number of ideas and principles and as the Preface states, it is not intended that it should be read cover-to-cover, but rather that it should be a source of reference as the individual challenges are anticipated in practice. I was also relieved to note that it made no attempt to provide a history of the Internet. I did not see the acronym ARPANET once!

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