Cour des comptes

USER RELATIONS AND GOVERNMENT MODERNISATION

Toward generalised use of digital public services

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The French government has not remained indifferent to the fundamental trends produced by the rapid development of digital technologies that are affecting the means of production, disintermediation, the emergence of new modes of communication and every other dimension of the economy. When speaking of the digital modernisation of government in general, there have unquestionably been changes in how public services function and how the public uses them.

Nevertheless, considering how long ago the government declared its aims in this area, the overall results do not represent an unqualified success. International studies, including ones conducted by the European Commission, point to a respectable performance by France. In 2015, it ranked thirteenth, four places higher than in 2014, based on an index composed of four key criteria (availability of dematerialised services, numbers of users, use of pre-filled forms, and data accessibility). Its performance is slightly above the European average, ahead of Germany and the United Kingdom, but trailing Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark. This ranking is reasonable and consistent with our country's standing as measured by the main economic indicators (notably, GDP per capita). However, France's results are not all that could be expected given that it has longed claimed to be engaged in a technological modernisation programme.

In fact, digital public services do not seem to have had a leading role in the modernisation of government and its relations with their users. Even when the possibility exists, digital access to public services is not users' preferred choice. A comparison with other European countries highlights this. Although the offering of digital services to private individuals is satisfactory, potential users avail themselves of these services only to a limited extent. The usage rate in France is low considering the length of time such services have been available and the practical features like pre-filled forms offered with them. Thus, while use of online services is increasing, even in population categories where it was very low a few years ago, it is still not widespread. The benefits for the public in terms of the savings of time and money are real, however, as impact studies have shown. But few such studies have been done, and their findings have received little attention: the advantages of dematerialised procedures are thus not sufficiently highlighted. Likewise, user satisfaction is not systematically measured, which would allow services to be adapted to the public's expectations.

Nor does the government appear to have fully seen the light and recognised the many benefits of developing online services. Generally speaking, public services have not been reorganised in fundamental ways, and the productivity gains that digital services could potentially yield are not being realised. Although budget conditions have brought the need for government belt-tightening and personnel cutbacks, the capacity of digital reforms to make these necessary measures

User relations and government modernisation
Toward generalised use of digital public services

supportable has not been specifically evaluated or included in the ways of addressing this situation. Realising the potential impact of digital public services on the organisation of government, notably in the regions, analysing the new dematerialised flows, and fully benefiting from the large quantities of data now available to the government assume that all the steps in modernisation – dematerialisation, simplification, budget savings – are structured and coordinated and that a genuine digital culture spreads throughout the government, which is not the case today. The development of public services is not being truly used yet as a lever of government modernisation.

This observation is confirmed by the way public services function at several levels. First, even though the digital modernisation programme was long ago declared a policy commitment, the government has still not finished structuring it, despite the progressive consolidation of the groups and resources involved. The programme was initially focused, starting in 1966, on introducing information technologies into the administrations, but it was soon reoriented with the government action programme for the information society (PAGSI)), announced in 1997, to include digitalisation, too. Attention then shifted to networks and interoperability as well as to user relations, with the latter given a higher priority as of 2011 and 2012.

Along with this longstanding policy commitment came a gradual consolidation of the resources needed to actually carry out the policy, with the creation of structures for cooperation and decision-making, uniform standards, and management and monitoring systems. Following numerous changes in the management of the government's digitalisation programme, the offices of the Prime Minister and within them, the Secretariat General for Government Modernisation (SGMAP), are in charge of it today. Their management activities are carried out through the chairman of the Government Information and Communications System Advisory Board as well as through the common strategic framework defined in 2012 and obligatory analysis and cost reporting for the largest projects using a specified method (MAREVA) to obtain a certificate of compliance from the Prime Minister's offices.

The positing of a single information system, the definition of standards, and the launching of structural transversal projects (based on the government-platform idea) form a coherent whole. However, five years after its launch, the programme's implementation is still hampered by several missing elements. For example, no real budget monitoring procedures have been put in place yet. The preponderant influence of the principal ministry departments and the weak leverage of the ministerial secretaries-general have slowed the government digitalisation programme, too. Above all, the instability of management structures is hindering its deployment, since the government seems to be paying too much attention to the institutional dimension of its programme. To strengthen the programme under way, priority should thus be given to stabilising the coordination and management framework for the government's digital modernisation.

User relations and government modernisation
Toward generalised use of digital public services

Another obstacle is that budget decisions are not consistent with government digital modernisation. First, even though electronic procedures are recognised as an important factor of international competitiveness, there are obvious shortcomings in the budgetary and economic assessment and monitoring of IT spending. Budget decisions in the IT realm are thus not well informed, and they generally lead to the choice of short-term approaches that result in under-investment in digital public services. Indeed, already-limited IT funding is getting smaller owing to across-the-board budget cuts. The largest share goes to the maintenance and regulatory updates of software used internally by the government, so little remains for new investment, including in digital public services. At the same time, the allocation for personnel costs is growing, with priority still given to professional skills that will not be needed in the future owing to the development of digital services. Dematerialised services are being introduced, but at too slow a pace to bring about a real transformation of relations with users. Budget decisions are thus sub-optimal from an economic standpoint.

As for human resources management, the government has not fully taken into account the new needs created by digital public services. Management of IT personnel is fragmented among government departments, with no mobility and no updating of hiring requirements. A recent reform was supposed to promote more coordination in personnel management among the ministries, but the measure is too limited to be fully effective, notably because it will apply neither to current personnel nor to all public employers.

Despite these critical observations, the conditions exist to enable digital public services to be a lever of government transformation. For one, more people have computers and are accustomed to using them; for another, structural projects concerning user identification, authentication, data exchange between administrations and other such issues are being undertaken: these two factors point to widespread reliance on online services in the future. Generalised use should, in turn, make it possible to respond to users' expectations (notably in terms of faster and easier access to public services); to maximise the capacity of digital services to reduce costs and improve productivity at a time of budget tightening; and to make work more rewarding for the personnel. This trend is consistent with the policy pursued in France for several years and particularly with its most recent developments.

This policy, which is designed to be progressive and to take into account the diverse categories of users, is aimed at making electronic systems the means of providing the right of access to public services. This objective can be achieved in stages. It might begin with services that are already fully accessible online such as the payment of income taxes – something recently decided by the Parliament. The methods of this transition can also be flexible. Several relevant

approaches are available – for example, for differentiating users – that have already been explored in several countries. Nevertheless, how effective and efficient the investments will be will depend largely on whether digital services are in generalised use. Only a very proactive approach will achieve this objective within a reasonable timeframe and maximise the impact of this transformation. This policy should thus be explicitly adopted, and a road map and implementation calendar drawn up for all administrations. Parliament should receive regular reports on each phase of the project so as to be informed of any planned changes, to hear the results of the implementation, and, whenever necessary, to adapt the legal framework.

To develop digital public services and increase their impact on government modernisation, any regulations or laws standing in the way must be removed. Some recently begun projects are intended to do this, and it is important to see they are actually carried out.

It is absolutely essential to simplify electronic identification of users, which became mandatory under the European eIDAS regulation adopted in July 2014. Although several European countries that are more advanced in the realm of digital public services have opted for the electronic identification card and digital signature (which offer a strong guarantee of authentication and data transmission security), French law obliged the Prime Minister's offices to institute in summer 2015 the FranceConnect identification system based on a single certified account for users.

Likewise, to deal with the problem of the compartmentalisation of government IT systems, which have been built in silos as new needs arose, the government-platform programme will replace repetitive requests for the same information from users with requests and flows of information between administrations. The "Tell Us Once" (Dites-le nous une fois) initiative is part of this programme, which may, as it does in other countries, also include a ban on repeatedly storing user data ("Store It Once" – Stockons-le une fois). This assumes, however, that legal and financial impediments to exchanging data between administrations can be removed and the issue of invoicing the exchanges between administrations can be worked out.

Last, people who want to use digital services are still obliged to deal with multiple public and private websites today. In early 2016, it was announced that two sites, Service-public.fr and Mon.service-public.fr, would be brought together in one portal, but this new arrangement will solve the problem only if the portal becomes the single gateway to all government services and the information they provide. Service-public.fr needs to become the address users go to automatically.

If the government is to make development of digital public services a real means of modernisation, they must be improved in other ways, too. They must be user-oriented, with a primary goal of their becoming fully digital. When that is impossible, a maximum of complementary services (appointment scheduling, downloadable forms, updates on pending matters, electronic payment, etc.)

should be offered. The SGMAP has a crucial role in this process. It must see that inter-ministerial projects are carried out to develop technical solutions for the various digital channels (computers, smartphones and tablets). More generally, the government must be committed to using existing systems and expanding its offering, particular for businesses.

The success of the government's digital modernisation efforts will depend on addressing two sets of conditions.

The first involves providing adequate user support. The digital divide should be regarded not as an obstacle to the expansion of digital services, but as a situation of inequality that needs to be improved by promoting wider use of these services. To deal with the absence of Internet coverage in some areas and with the individual lack of access in homes, an important first step is to make digital public services available at more locations through the many existing access points, notably in rural areas (community service facilities), and including those created specifically for vulnerable population groups (information-mediation-multiservice points). More terminals also need to be installed at public facilities (prefectures, town halls, post offices, libraries, etc.). It would also be a good idea to offer personalised help to users through remote support or people physically present at locations access to digital public services is provided. Civic service volunteers, for example, could be added to the personnel who offer such assistance. Last, online public services cannot come into general use unless they are accessible to everyone and therefore, unless government websites actually comply with accessibility standards for all types of disability.

The second condition is to increase people's trust in digital services. To do this, government websites must be made easier to find by creating a single portal for accessing public services. It must also be possible to quickly distinguish government websites from private ones, and a campaign should be conducted to inform users about them. Above all, compliance with IT security standards and norms and protection of civil liberties should be taken into account at the outset of projects, and these issues should be dealt with more openly.

Orientation and recommendations

Orientation

To progressively make electronic systems the means of providing the right of access to public services; to draw up an inter-ministerial road map for this purpose setting forth the pace and stages of this process according to the maturity of digital public services and specifying the user-support measures necessary for smooth deployment. This road map would be presented regularly to the Parliament to take stock of results and to consider legislation needed for the implementation of this process.

Recommendations

1. Conduct satisfaction surveys systematically on digital public services and report the findings at least once a year;

2. Reinforce the activities of the general data administrator by creating a data managers network within the ministries;

3. Set aside a budget from the appropriations administered by the secretaries-general for transversal digital public service projects in each ministry;

4. Append to the finance bill a document on the transversal policy for the digital transformation of government;

5. Specify more precisely the portions of IT budgets to be used for digital public services and set priorities commensurate with stated goals;

6. Integrate into the inter-ministerial corps of ICT engineers all government IT teams, starting with those too small to have management responsibility in their original corps;

7. Reassess the advisability of developing a national electronic identity card;

8. Establish the principle of reference data, meaning that a single administration is responsible for collecting certain data, serving as their primary storage site, maintaining them, updating them, and providing them to the other administrations;

9. Compile a directory of the databases in the administrations containing information that is considered a secret protected by the law; determine the actual legal constraints that may restrict its communication to the administrations; and define a method for these administrations to use it;

10. Make the future service-public.fr portal the single gateway to public services and the information they provide;

11. Develop, following a preliminary advisability study, inter-ministerial technical solutions for appointment scheduling, updates on pending matters, electronic signatures, digital mailboxes and electronic payment;

12. Formalise at the inter-ministerial level and adapt for each ministry a digital public services communications plan and training programme for users, opinion leaders and the press with support from existing local networks;

13. Increase the access points to digital public services (post offices, libraries, etc.) open to the public and equipped with printers, with a person to provide help, including, if need be, trained civic service volunteers;

14. Process and store the personal information of public service users in secure servers that comply with ANSSI standards and are located within France;

15. Make it obligatory in each ministry to designate a French Data Protection Authority correspondent with the secretary general and obtain CNIL Certification of Privacy Governance for all government sites.