

7 Leveraging Networks for Public Service Delivery

Transforming Public Service Delivery: 30 Years of E-Government

Advancement in information and communications technology (ICT) has transformed public service delivery over the past three decades, delivering unprecedented levels of convenience and cost savings for the public. This is brought about primarily through two key transformations – automation and round-the-clock access. Automation enables government agencies to speedily process submissions while minimising human errors. Round-the-clock access to government e-services affords citizens 24/7 convenience from the comfort of their homes.

As recent as 10 years ago, a citizen would fill in stacks of paper forms to file his personal income tax returns. A restaurateur would need to make multiple visits to different government agencies to obtain the requisite permits to open a restaurant. All library-goers would stand in long queues at the library to borrow or return a book. Today, the same citizen would file his personal income tax returns online – a virtually hassle-free task with the pre-population of data fields. The restaurateur would apply for the necessary licences to open a restaurant through the one-stop Online Business Licensing Service (OBLIS) without having to step out of his house. And library-goers would drop off books at the library drop-box at any time without having to stand in long queues.

Government services have indeed come a long way since the first foray into the 'e' platform almost 30 years ago.

7.1 Pre-Year 2000: Laying the basic IT infrastructure

Back in 1980, the Government was pre-dominantly operating on paper documents and physical files. There were only 100 computer terminals deployed in three ministries, with no network infrastructure to speak of.

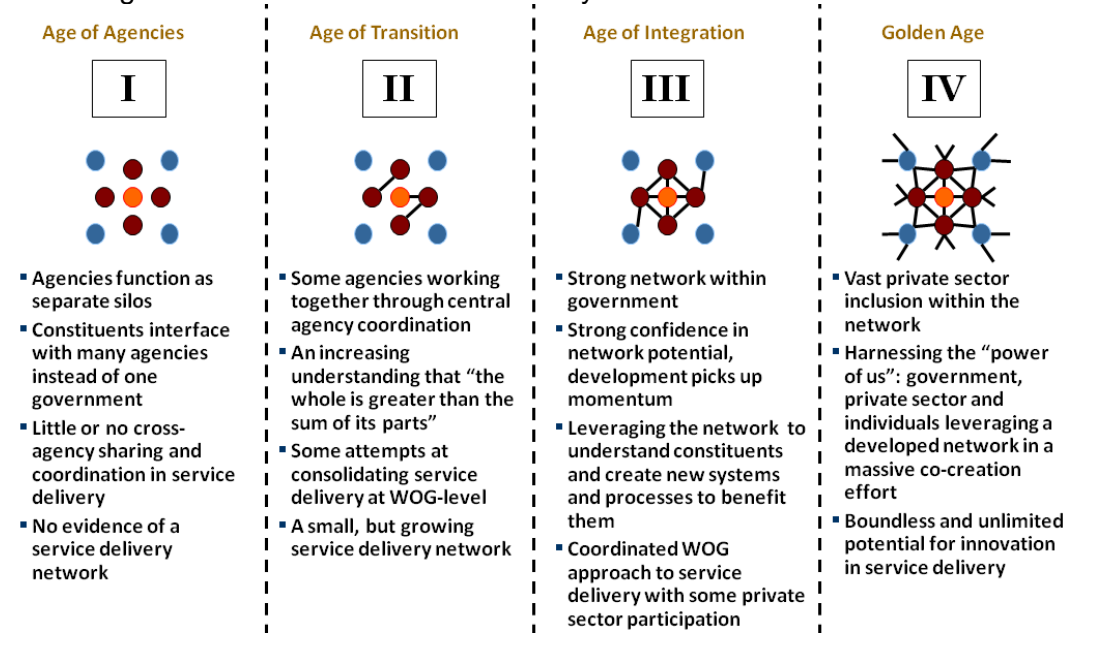
Recognising that technology could be a key driver of economic competitiveness, the Government launched the Civil Service Computerisation Programme in 1981 to transform public administration. Internal work processes were automated and the volume of paperwork was reduced for greater operational efficiencies. Basic network infrastructure (such as the civil service-wide email system and government data centre) was developed to facilitate cross-agency work and consolidate computing resources. These efforts laid the foundation to transform public service delivery in the 21st century.

7.2 Year 2000 & Beyond: Transforming the Public Service Delivery Network

The proliferation of the Internet in the 1990s heralded the digital age of the 21st century and a new era of e-Government. Singapore's efforts in improving public service delivery can be depicted as a progression up the network maturity model as illustrated in [Box 7.1](#).

Box 7.1: Evolution of Public Service Delivery Network – A Model

This model shows how networks within a government mature from the Age of Agencies (Stage I), when there are no or very few networks, to the Golden Age of Networks (Stage IV), when the public and private sectors are all inter-linked in a well-connected network. By leveraging the built-up networks, a government can potentially tap on the resources, expertise and collective knowledge of all parties to achieve greater innovation in service delivery.



7.3 The Age of Agencies (2000-2003): Putting Public Services Online

With the proliferation of the Internet, the Government was able to deliver public services anytime, anywhere. Over 1,600 public services (or all of the e-feasible public services) were made available online, significantly reducing the need for counter visits and paper forms. This translated into greater convenience, shorter processing time and lower handling costs for both the public and the government agencies. One such e-service was the BizFile service (www.bizfile.gov.sg) which facilitated the filing of documents by businesses (see [Box 7.2](#)).

Box 7.2: BizFile

Fully launched in January 2003, BizFile is a one-stop portal for businesses to file all legally prescribed business/company forms for the purpose of registration and fulfilling statutory disclosure requirements. Prior to BizFile, applicants had to go personally to the Registry of Companies and Businesses (currently known as the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority) to hand in handwritten forms for processing. Incorporating a new company used to take 5 days and cost between \$1,200 and \$35,000, depending on company size. Today, it takes only 15 minutes online and costs \$300, regardless of company size.

BizFile is the first fully electronic-filing government project in the Asia Pacific. It was also a finalist in the e-Government category of the 2004 Stockholm Challenge which recognised excellence in public ICT implementation to promote administrative efficiency.

To enable the digitally-disadvantaged to also enjoy the convenience of public e-services, a network of Citizen-Connect Centres (formerly known as eCitizen Help Centres) was set up across Singapore (see [Box 7.3](#)).

Box 7.3: Citizen-Connect Centres

Citizens who do not have an internet connection at home, or who need help to get online can visit the Citizen-Connect Centres. Computer terminals are available for free usage, and dedicated service officers are present to help citizens who need assistance to transact with the Government online. There are currently 27 Citizen-Connect Centres sited at convenient locations (e.g. community centres) across Singapore.

Notwithstanding these developments, the Government remained in the Age of Agencies whereby many public services continued to be offered in silos by individual government agencies, with limited coordination across agencies.

7.4 The Age of Transition (2003-2006): Integrating Services

In the early 2000s, there was growing recognition that ICT frees government agencies from physical constraints, and can enable agencies to deliver services in an integrated and coordinated manner. A concerted push for more coordinated service delivery was made, enabling the Government to make some progress towards the Age of Transition. A number of critical enabling infrastructures were developed, including SingPass, a common password that individuals can use to transact with different government agencies, thereby eliminating the need to remember multiple passwords (see [Box 7.4](#)).

Box 7.4: SingPass

Launched in 2003, SingPass is a common password that individuals can use to carry out secured transactions with different government agencies. SingPass supports 270 e-services offered by 79 agencies, or almost all government transactions requiring authentication. There are 2.6 million SingPass users today, and the number of SingPass transactions has grown from 7.9 million in 2004 to over 30 million in 2009.

Agencies also started to work together to streamline and consolidate their business requirements so as to provide a seamless, one-stop service to citizens and businesses. A number of cross-agency, integrated e-services were developed, such as the Online Business Licensing Service which allows businesses to apply for some 80 different business licences from 16 agencies through a single application form (see [Box 7.5](#)).

Box 7.5: The Online Business Licensing Service

The Online Business Licensing Service (OBLS) provides a one-stop service for new businesses to register and apply for licences. Applicants need only complete one integrated form and make a single payment for the multiple licences online, instead of a series of forms and separate payments to different agencies. This is the result of business process streamlining and re-engineering to aggregate related licenses and remove redundant ones. Today, 80% of businesses' start-up licensing needs are met by OBLS. The service has reduced businesses' average application time from five hours to less than an hour, and agencies' processing time from 21 days to 8 days. To date, OBLS has garnered several international recognitions, including the United Nations Public Service Award that recognises excellence in public service.

7.5 The Age of Integration (2006-2010): Integrating Government

Integration efforts within the public sector gained momentum through the 2000s, strengthening the Whole-of-Government (WOG) approach towards service delivery. Initiatives such as the Unique Entity Number (see [Box 7.6](#)) paved our way into the Age of Integration.

Box 7.6: The Unique Entity Number

In the past, private entities (businesses, companies, societies and trade unions) had to use different identifiers when they interact with various government agencies. At least 20 identifiers were issued by 17 government agencies for more than 30 entity-types. With the Unique Entity Number (UEN) implemented in 2009, all 420,000 entities registered in Singapore only need to remember one number - their UEN - when dealing with any of the 84 government agencies.

Singapore is the first country in the world to implement a common identification number format for all entities registered in the country. UEN won the "Connected Government" category of the 2009 Government Technology Awards which recognises excellence in inter-agency workflow.

Nonetheless, to fully elevate Singapore's public service delivery into the Age of Integration, more needs to be done to develop a holistic understanding of the needs of different constituents and bring about closer collaboration among public agencies. The key success factor does not lie on technology alone, but rather, people and mindset. The Age of Integration requires public agencies to adopt fundamental mindset shifts and move away from the traditional, silo-ed way of delivering public services. Agencies need to work towards to achieve better collective outcomes, even if it means a little more inconvenience to them, e.g. changing their internal systems and processes.

7.6 The Golden Age (2011 and beyond): The Next Era of e-Government?

There are several emerging trends which are likely to shape the development of e-Government. The advent of Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook and YouTube has brought about unprecedented levels of communication, sharing and collaboration within loosely connected communities. At the same time, the issues that the

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Government faces are becoming increasingly multi-faceted and dynamic. The current model in which the Government decides which services to deploy and how to deploy them, has an inherent limit on the extent to which the Government can improve public service delivery.

To catalyse and sustain the next wave of innovation in public service delivery, one way may be to harness the power of the masses, by involving the private and people sectors in identifying, developing and delivering services to meet their needs. The next phase of e-Government in the Golden Age of public service delivery networks could well centre on mass collaboration, where the resources, expertise and collective knowledge of individuals and communities are harnessed to create greater value for all parties. The Government, instead of being a sole provider of public services, is likely to evolve into a platform provider which sets and referees the rules in an ecosystem to allow the participants, whether private sector or individuals, to freely innovate and create value-added services on top of or even superseding existing public services. By tapping on the wider community, new approaches to solving public issues and delivering public services may emerge (see [Box 7.7](#)).

Box 7.7: Comparing Present and Future e-Government - Approaches to Public Service Delivery

	PRESENT	FUTURE
Government's Role	Service Provider	Facilitator
Citizens' Role	Passive Consumers	Active Participants
Government-Citizen Relationship	"Me-to-You"	"Me-with-You"

7.7 Concluding Remarks

Singapore's e-Government efforts in the past 30 years have been well-received. 88% of users expressed satisfaction with the overall quality of e-services while 90% of users would recommend online government services. Singapore has also been consistently ranked among the top three in international e-Government benchmarking studies.

The journey ahead is filled with new opportunities, but also some challenges. It represents a shift from "mandate" to "collaborate", from "my turf, my responsibility" to "let's work together", and from "service delivery" to "value creation". Nevertheless, with strong leadership and a persistent call for change, this new paradigm of public service delivery can happen, with benefits and opportunities for all.