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Virtual Public Administration: Improving Public Administration
Procedures through Project Management

Georgios T. Kapogiannis – G.Kapogiannis@pgr.salford.ac.uk
(PhD Candidate, University of Salford, Manchester, M5 4WT, UK)

Yiannis E. Polychronakis – Y.Polychronakis@salford.ac.uk
(Senior Lecturer, University of Salford, Manchester, M5 4WT, UK)

Nikostratos E. Polychronakis - npol@forthnet.gr
(Network Manager, Forthnet, Crete, Greece)

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Abstract

The best way to contribute to electronic and mobile Government is by creating a public administration network in virtual communities. This is essentially the definition of **Virtual Public Administration (VPA)**. The success of the VPA is based on the virtual project management application. Our paper examines, theoretically and empirically, how VPA could potentially contribute to better public administration services and how effective project management application could facilitate the proposed transition. The research strategy is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. Our study provides both qualitative (statements of directors, observations) and quantitative (metrics) examples related to these improvements. Three UK based councils have agreed in principle to participate to the study. Furthermore, in Greece the General Inspector of Public Administration, the National University of Athens and others has also agreed to participate. Our paper concludes with the contribution of our work along with some interesting avenues for further research.

Keywords

Public Administration, Project Management, Social Networks, Virtual Politics, Virtual Communities

1.0 Introduction

The personal or professional set of relationships between individuals has been referred to as social networking. Social networks represent both a collection of ties between people and the strength of those ties. Often used as a measure of social "connectedness", recognising social networks assists in determining how information moves throughout groups, and how trust can be established and fostered. Humans continuously create and re-create social networks on a daily basis. This is a fact of life in human nature i.e. expansion of communication opportunities while developing personalities (Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, 2005).

Certainly, social networks could be developed in virtual environments also. "Virtuality" provides an appropriate platform for people to communicate, share ideas and experiences, negotiate etc. In an ideal scenario the virtual environment takes the shape of a parallel universe where people can meet and communicate with friends and colleagues.

1.1 Virtual Politics

As long ago as when the agora, or public centre, replaced the palace as the centre of Ancient Greek city life, public administration became a matter of public politics. The motivation to sort between true and false so fundamental to Plato's philosophy of the time is a historically contingent one, rooted and contextualised in the rivalry of such Athenian democracy. Plato's philosophical dialogues (Plato, 1892) reflect the fundamental issue in the Greek city states that derives from their fundamental difference from the imperial states around them: where a monarch, emperor or despot appoints his functionaries, the citizens of a Greek city state must elect from among rival claimants the best man for the job. Telling the difference between the two required a whole new approach to understanding public life.

The distinction between the real and virtual has similarly, in recent years, become the site of fierce contests, where rival thinkers variously make outlandish claims or dire health warnings about the disjunction between the two (Sotto, 1997). It has also been noted that the distinction may not be so pronounced as it appears, and that in contrast "Virtuality" may indeed be a part of what it is to be human (Kreps, 2008). We are now in an age of transnational capitalism, where eBusiness straddles the globe and national borders are becoming more porous and 'cultural' as transnational blocs dissolve protections and open up trade and exchange. In particular, the global nature of the Internet, and the virtual worlds that are growing upon it, inhabited by millions from dozens of countries, is making the distinction between the real and the virtual seem to be another boundary that is becoming increasingly blurred.

Again we are faced with creating a new approach to understanding public life, perhaps no longer so based upon the nation state, and certainly no longer so dependent upon physical location. eGovernment is already bringing web-based services into the home and work place. But when the work place and our leisure spaces are increasingly online in transnational virtual worlds, such localised web-based services will themselves have to evolve. In the virtual agoras of these internet worlds, the public administration of nation states seems likely to become an issue of concern, with the potential – we contend in this paper - for eGovernment to evolve into vGovernment.

1.2 Approach from Public Administration to Virtual Public Administration

In terms of strategic planning and implementation public administration currently takes a number of different forms in countries around Europe. Arguably, Aristotle's contribution through Ethics and Politics and the pertinent focus on the democratic elements of societies have been instrumental in developing the public sector as we experience it today. In ancient Greece Plato, Aristotle and others used "Agora" to advocate new theories and philosophies but also as an opportunity for collective decision making. Most countries are using adaptations of this original model predominantly to facilitate conflict resolution and decision maturity and enlargement, principally achieved through some form of a democratic process nationally and internationally (Polychronakis, 2007).

Local culture affects history, state and therefore governance (Bratsis, 2006). Most European nations therefore attained their current structural, cultural and overall governance state through fighting and struggle, predominantly aiming at liberty and independence. Greece and UK are just another two examples of the above. Arguably, the former has struggled for very prolonged periods and it is currently in a developing stage whereas the latter has been long developed, a development mostly associated with the industrial revolution. The above mentioned stages of development are also mirrored in the affairs and governance of their respective public sectors.

In that respect one of the strategies utilised within the European Union is to appropriately position the public sector to create the suitable structural, legislative, cultural, and economical infrastructures to provide better services and to link citizens in the member states and with the rest of the world (Polychronakis et al, 2008). In real terms this is particularly complicated and increasingly difficult (Schutter et al, 2001). One can only speculate how easy would that become in "Virtuality" i.e. in a virtual public sector environment where citizens could use home internet facilities to "walk" in to a tax office, "talk" to a virtual public servant and other fellow citizens and receive services at 2 o' clock in the morning, if they so wish?

1.3 Virtual Public Administration Analysis

In achieving the above many complexities exist, particularly in terms of adapting Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for Public Administration service delivery. Arguably, development of new ICT solutions would be particularly expensive and time consuming with no real guarantees for successful implementation particularly in the European Union context where integration is constantly in the agenda. Instead, re-engineering the infrastructure of current ICT solutions in systems at national level (assuming, of course, that they exist) could perhaps go a long way to create the envisaged results (UN E-Government Survey, 2008). Naturally, the ultimate aim is to reduce the time and effort procedures and services take for all exchanges between citizens and governments in the Union.

One of the basic reasons for inefficiencies in PA systems around Europe is the very nature of the infrastructure of the political system in each country. An example of that is Greece. Greece has been an EU member since 1981 and since then had been awarded a considerable number of co-funded EU projects. One of the main issues associated with public sector projects in Greece is that of IT response rates from the project implementer to the main project coordinator/champion (Observatory for the Greek IS, 2007). That happens predominantly because the ICT penetration in PA in Greece is lower than the EU standards/average. In terms of Internet Connections (Broadband Networks in particular) for instance, current price policies do not, as yet, support individual and businesses to absorb the funds, although this is fast changing to the better (Observatory for the Greek IS, 2007). This problem exists in other EU state members.

Public Administration is a system. A system is a collection of interacting subsystems designed to satisfy a set of requirements (Carnegie Mellon University, 2008). The complicatedness emerges when attempts are made to connect interacting subsystems in a synchronous and asynchronous environment. The example of an efficient and effective PA system is based predominantly on the establishment and interactions between, state, and local government agencies that should administer, oversee, and manage public programs and have executive, legislative, or judicial authority over other private and public institutions within a given area (Foster et al, 2007). These agencies also set policy, create laws, adjudicate civil and criminal legal cases, provide for public safety and for national defense. Clearly, an efficient and effective PA system is a necessary prerequisite for the above.

Increasingly however, this becomes almost impossible because each system has a different structure. In the main these types of structures are progressively very complex originating in national cultures (religion and beliefs that is) and that alone generates further complexities (Polychronakis & Syntetos, 2007; The Midwest Political Science Association, 2003).

Suppose that the above interactions could take place in a Virtual Reality World. That would make sense, since the difference between reality and "Virtuality" is based only on timing variables at present and in the future (please see also diagram 1). But contrary to the real world "Virtuality" is an open world without barriers and boards in any form or shape. It is a spectacular world.

So what is Virtual Public Administration and how would it work? A simple example would be certificate provision by the public sector such as a birth certificate, tax return, a passport etc. In the real world issuing any of the above takes considerable effort and time not to mention the associated inconvenience, and the need for tolerance and serenity from both public servants and citizens! That of course happens for many reasons; the actual procedure speed associated with bureaucracy in the system, communication or general human resource issues related with training, development, moods etc. In VPA the above barriers simply do not exist and therefore procedures could be changed faster and the whole system becomes more effective.

Clearly, there are benefits to be realized here with regards to timings and integration. For instance many projects are driven by strict deadlines to achieve predetermined project objectives. Naturally, management of risk can be particularly complex and time consuming with no definite guaranteed on success rates, albeit of course the fact that repetition can increase the probability of achieving some of the aforementioned objectives. In VPA the effort to manage projects risk is minimized or otherwise alleviated altogether. As one may expect trials of new services are more "stable" in virtual environments where the new service developer can experiment with potential solutions before they are launched to local and international communities.

All projects share one common characteristic: The projection of ideas and activities into new advancements and innovations. In achieving this, fundamentally, Project Management deals with trade-offs between Time, Cost and Quality conformances. This is accomplished by using a methodology that: (a) formally addresses the main aims and objectives of the project, (b) identifies the key stakeholders, (c) establishes the critical success factors and their key performance indicators, (d) plans and schedules the activities, (e) assigns resources to them and (f) evaluates the related risks (Polychronakis et al, 2005). Manchester City Council (MCC) has developed a novel Project Management methodology to facilitate more effective supply chain management and integration. The MCC approach is partly based on virtual principles and elements (Polychronakis et al, 2008; Fletcher & Polychronakis, 2007).

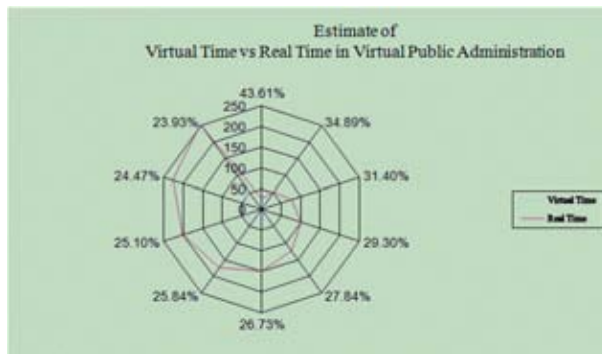


Diagram 1: Estimate of Virtual Time vs Real Time in Virtual Public Administration

The above image (diagram 1) presents some preliminary results obtained from General Inspector of Public Administration in Greece where the sense of time is presented in terms of project management implementation in virtual and real terms. According to that, procedures in "Virtuality" could be more effective in terms of time, management of risk, service levels etc. The management of risk for instance, becomes less complex predominantly due to the fast repetition of procedures in "Virtuality".

1.5. Conclusion and Extensions

The application of Project Management for the purpose of facilitating Virtual Public Management (VPA) development has been suggested to be a fruitful area for further research. This paper presents on the development and implementation of a novel of PM methodology in city councils and ministries through Virtual environments.

City Councils and Administration offices are looking at possible extensions of VPA in terms of:

- a) Decreasing the Bureaucracy in public sector
- b) Close the gap between public and private sector
- c) Procurement & Supply Chain Management
- d) Interactive Learning Environments in Public Sector

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About the Authors:***Georgios T. Kapogiannis****Co-Author*

Georgios T. Kapogiannis is a candidate Doctorate of Philosophy in "ICT Project Management in Public Management" in Salford Business School at the University of Salford, Manchester. He holds a M.Sc. in "Economics and Management of Telecommunication Networks" and a B.Sc. in "Applied Informatics in Management and Finance". He had been granted a number of Scholarships, notably, by the State Foundation Institute (Greece) for studies in Finland at the University of Jyväskylä, and from the University at Albany (State New York University – Centre for Technology in Government). He has articles included in the proceedings of several International Conferences (i.e. 20th European Conference on Operational Research, 2nd International Conference of Mobile Government) and is currently acting as a peer reviewer for prestigious European Journal such as the European Journal of ePractice. He has work experience in EU funded Project as Economo – Technical Expert more than 5 years (Budget > 8m Euro) in public and private sector. Also, he is Member Board of Directors in the Finnish Hellenic Chamber of Commerce since 2005. Contact details: G.Kapogiannis@pgr.salford.ac.uk.

About the Authors (continued):**Yiannis E. Polychronakis***Co-Author*

Yiannis E. Polychronakis is currently a Senior Lecturer in Logistics and Project Management based in Salford Business School at the University of Salford, Manchester, UK. He has published several articles in prestigious international journals (International Journal of Production Economics, International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management) in the area of Project Management application for Supply Chain Development, and has a number of papers included in refereed International Conference Proceedings. Yiannis has also assisted a number of private and public organisations in developing and implementing best practices in the areas of supply chain development and project management. Organisations include Kawneer (Europe), Silent Night, Cleveland Guest, Trafford City Council, Manchester City Council, Primary Care Trusts and more. Contact details: Y.Polychronakis@salford.ac.uk.

About the Authors (continued):**Nikostratos E. Polychronakis***Co-Author*

Nikostratos E. Polychronakis received a BEng in Computer Systems Engineering (Univ. Sussex, UK - June 1994) and an MSc in Digital Electronics and Parallel Processing Systems (Universities of Sussex and Brighton, UK - Sep 1995). On July 1997 he joined Data Information Systems (D.I.S.) in Athens, Greece where he was responsible for software integration in the area of warehouse management. On November 1997 he joined FORTHnet S.A. Research & Development Department and since then he has been coordinating in the area of Network Management. He also, holds the position of Project Management participating in Large European and National projects. From September 1998 he has been a Computer Science Lecturer at the Technological Educational Institute (ATEI) of Iraklion-Crete. Member of IEE (MIEE) since 1994. Member of the Technical Chamber of Greece (TEE) since October 1998. Contact details: npol@forthnet.gr.