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Coördinatiecel Vlaams e-government	Autor:	Geert Mareels	Version:	2006/11/15

Government Technology World, New Zealand

Understanding the business challenges of all government departments.

*If you want to build a boat, do not instruct the men to saw wood,
stitch the sails, prepare the tools and organize the work,
but make them long for setting sail and travel to distant lands.
Antoine De Saint-Exupéry*

Mister Chairman,
Honorable Minister Cunliff,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a **true privilege** for me to have been invited to your conference to discuss with you from the background of my experience in Belgian and Flemish e-government. The programme is extremely varied and interesting, in fact, if it weren't on the other side of the world, I would even attend it without being a key note speaker myself. It's also a very special moment for me, because it's the first time I can do this in a country that's 20 times larger than Flanders, yet has less inhabitants. If my statistics are correct there are 4.2 million people living here and there are 5.5 million Flemish citizens in Belgium. By the way, don't be ashamed if you don't really know where Flanders is. I'll be happy if the pilot will find his way back to Brussels when I fly back. Google Earth should get him there, no doubt.

1. IT TAKING THE LEAD

The brochure for this congress mentions a few topics to be discussed. ***How do you demonstrate the business case for new IT solutions? When should IT take the lead and when should it play a supportive role in government departments. My simple answer is: IT shouldn't.*** It shouldn't demonstrate business cases for new solutions and it shouldn't take the lead. Because there you've got two recipes for disaster.

Haven't we all had the painful experience that state-of-the-art and advanced IT-solutions are gathering dust in the server rooms of our administration? Because time and time again IT-professionals think they know what's best for business and come up with yet another brilliant IT-solution that will finally deliver what the previous solution clearly didn't. And then the management blames the IT-department for buying something they didn't need and the IT-department sees yet another illustration of the fact that non-IT personnel are morons if they don't see the business opportunities for the new software.

What happens most often is that vendors come to the IT-department with an exciting new piece of hard- or software. An Enterprise Application Integration tool full of bells and whistles, or a collaboration software suite in the upper right corner of Gartner's Magic Quadrant, or perhaps a highly secured E-payment solution. **The IT-people then invite their peers in the different government agencies to come and have a look at this marvel of new technology.** After which they all agree this is indeed what the organisation needs to get up to speed with the rest of the



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world. There might be, or there might not be a **decision process where the head of the agency has to approve the purchase**. But why would he veto it, as long as the IT-department stays within its budget. Chances are the General Manager doesn't even understand what he's approving.

In my experience, as an IT manager you can survive if a billion dollar mainframe explodes, but woe on you if the email is down for more than ten minutes. It's at least one explanation why it's so hard to sell an IT disaster recovery and contingency plan to the government. I know at least one minister who switches to Hotmail when the network goes down.

And let's not forget, the **IT-department frequently does have a good case**, proving on paper that the purchase will advance the functioning of the Ministry. The only problem is that it might not exactly be what the people in the field were waiting for. Or that it's nice to have this e-payment tool, just to bad we don't sell anything. **So do not, I repeat, do not think that you know what's good for business.**

You can either all leave now, or throw me out. But don't forget those 5.5. million Flemish behind me who can land here in 38 hours.

The argument goes the other way round too though. **Nothing worse than a manager who thinks he knows about computers because he knows how to switch on a Playstation 3.** *Last year we built an system to prepare the government meeting completely digital. From the first draft of a policy paper, over the whole set of formal and informal steps in the decision process to the point it's sent to the State Journal and the document gets archived or published on the web. Easy, quite cheap and we won an award with the thing. But during the four months it took us to build it, the chief of staff of our Minister-president came up with a better idea for digitalizing the government. And since then, they've Xeroxed all official documents and saved them as a PDF file. Mailing the documents to eachother. In less than a year time they have a stack of unsearchable PDF and an acute storage problem. Well, at least they're now begging to use our system.*

I'm not the first one to put forward the idea that the **IT-department has to listen to the business** side, rather than the other way around. As you know I work for the Flemish government, one of the seven Belgian governments. In the Flemish administration alone there are now 65 agencies. If ever a country needed integrated government its ours. Asking which government body is responsible for water pollution is a popular quiz show question.

*We've recently implemented "New Public Management". Someone told me that was a New Zealand invention. I've got no doubt it works fine here, but when the idea reached the other side of the world it wasn't really helping forward the case for integrated government, to put it mildly. Someone forgot that when you turn your administrations into little shops, the managers will behave like shopkeepers. For who the other shopkeeper is not a colleague but a competitor. **And then it's my task to glue the whole thing back together again.** All the kings horses and all the kings men....*

To give you an illustration, even in the field of IT, they now all think their autonomy goes all the way. So we've got now no less than five different collaboration tools. *E-room / Documentum/ SharePoint / Mermig / Alfresco and Arco.* Everybody's willing to collaborate, as long as it's on their platform.



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But it's so much stronger than ourselves to go out and find business **problems** for our IT **solutions**, rather than the other way around. Before we start talking hardware, middleware and software, we should let the public sector discover the advantages of *shareware*.... And with that I don't mean the well-known IT-term for distributing software, but the concept of sharing information from one government body to another, or ideally to build integrated services for the public.

2. INTEGRATED GOVERNMENT

Achieving integrated government has little to do with Information Technology. **It's most of all a cultural revolution within the administration.** What would have prevented civil servants 50 years ago to seek the information they need from other government bodies? They could have written their colleagues to ask for all the documents they needed for their files. But instead they preferred to ask their customers to do all the running around. It was much easier to ask them to compile our dossiers for us (over and over again). And if everything took too long, it was the citizens' fault not the civil servants'.

That mentality is still haunting our administrative processes. **Shifting the burden for data collection from the citizens and companies to the administration is not such a popular idea among civil servants.** So it's a good thing that modern ICT has taken away the last excuses for not starting comprehensive data-sharing between agencies. ICT makes integrated government feasible, cheaper and easier for civil servants and citizens alike.

What is often needed most is a core team of people selling the ideas of integrated government, of data-sharing, of breaking down the silos between agencies. Before you can start thinking about technology, you'll need to start selling business ideas.

Our experience is that one cannot really expect the management of one single agency to think in terms of integrated government. It's often not even one of their business targets. But when we bring two or more leaders together and suggest that they take an honest look at what they can offer each other to advance their own processes, we find a great willingness to cooperate. And at that stage it's vital that the experts step in with their knowledge about how ICT can help them realize their projects.

We have been bringing people together to discuss integrated services on a big scale as well. Today we're running 18 different working groups with over a 100 civil servants from the 78 departments and agencies. They're telling us what they need, and what we should build for them. And we tell them how we're building our generic services and negotiate the impact it will have on their work. And I'm using the word negotiate in this context because introducing technology that requires a big overhaul of their legacy systems or their way of working will often result in a silent refusal to cooperate.

One of our working groups for instance is discussing the topic of "*income*". We have identified 35 different administrative processes where the income of a citizen is a relevant input. They can get a study grant when they earn less than a certain amount, but your child care provider has to charge you in relation to your income. What happens today is that they all ask the citizen to show a copy of his tax declaration. What we hope to achieve is that we can interrogate online the different sources on income (taxes, social security and welfare) and provide the administration with the exact answer to its question. **Which most often is not the entire tax declaration of**



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their client, but a simple answer like: how much do we have to charge this person? We are convinced that in this way the protection of the privacy of a citizen will be strongly enhanced. But it's evident that to make this a success, we will have to cater the exact information our administrations need. Our experience is that they're not even much interested in how we will achieve this technically, as long as it is working and has as little as possible impact on their existing business processes and technology.

Data sharing between agencies is on the top of our list of priorities. *We use an Enterprise Application Integration for our platform, but to be honest we're not using it to it's full capacity yet. It seems we didn't really need that kind of sophisticated too to shift data around. We are open for more real integration of applications, but traditionally each agency has built the capacity to do an end-to-end process completely in house. Unlike the different departments of a private company, government agencies rarely need input from other agencies during their business process. With the one exception of information.*

Many of our local governments are now very proud that their citizens can download their **birth certificates online**, and don't have to queue for it at the town hall. Fact is, it's only other government administrations who demand to get these birth certificates. I've never met any company who wanted me to prove I was born. **Wouldn't it then be wiser to establish a direct link between the National Registry and the administration who wants to know your identity? We did this for a number of applications, saving a lot of queuing time at the counters.**

3. BUILDING BLOCKS

We are fortunate in Belgium to have three building blocks to help us achieve just that. We've got the State register, we've got a database with all enterprises and we've got the Electronic ID card.

And we've got the IT-platform to connect with those two databases.

My e-government agency has built a platform for exchanging information about citizens, enterprises, addresses, buildings and maps.

All our citizens and the foreigners who have had contact with the Belgian public services are registered centrally with their national number and a limited set of identifying information. We use this to identify a citizen and integrate this information with his or hers administrative file in the different Flemish administrations. **But this is not Big Brother.** Every connection to the National Registry, and every flow of data about a person has to be authorized in advance by a National Privacy Commission presided by a magistrate of the courts.

We can only receive authorisation for a specific and limited use of data for a specific administrative process. We can for instance provide the family composition of a person to the public transport company, because they give discounts to large families. But they cannot use that same information to send everybody their publicity folders.

We have to keep a log of every public servant or application accessing the data and every citizen



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can check that log to see who has consulted his personal data and for what purpose. Again, rather than having every Flemish administration invest in this security layer themselves, we provide it centrally as an e-government service for all the agencies. These regulations demand quite some time and investment, but it's absolutely essential to gain and keep the confidence of the public in what we're doing.

The principal architectural design principle behind both the Crossroads Bank as well as our own integration platform is that we **do not needlessly copy** the data from the authoritative sources. Rather we access their web services on the fly the moment we need the information, resulting in a true **Service Oriented Architecture**. Indeed, when we copy data, we're never sure whether we've got the latest authoritative information.

4. E PROCUREMENT

But this conference is about IT, not about data sharing I guess. So let's have a look at some technological issues. What in my mind offers a huge technological challenge is the whole programme for eProcurement. I guess that basically the procedure is the same all over the world. So we need to build a system where a public service can **publish its tenders** in a way every company can access it simultaneously. Where of course even your service provider can't get a head start looking into the governments purchase plans. Then you have to build a **secure environment to receive the offers**. In our procurement laws the notion was introduced that any digital offer containing a virus is void. Now of course that wasn't a very wise thing to do, as no company is willing to take the risk of missing out on a major deal because their virus scanner didn't work properly.

And the administration needs to **store the offers securely until they're opened** simultaneously with the offers that might still have arrived on paper.

But that's not all for EProcurement. We would appreciate a **decision making platform too compare and rank the offers**. And an **E-bidding and E-auction** solution is where it seems the biggest gains for the public sector can be found. And there's **E-invoicing** to top it off. The Danish government saved millions of Euros by banning all invoices on paper. All suppliers have to send in their invoices digitally, resulting in quite an important efficiency gain. And again security and trustworthiness are very important. **You don't want to pay a lot of money to a 16 year old hacker who sent you a fake bill.**

There are two problems though with EProcurement. The advantages for the public sector are a lot bigger than those of the private enterprises who are made to use our platform. There's a remarkable paradox that our government is quicker to invest in solutions that benefit the enterprises but is quite slow to support efficiency growth in their own administrations. The second problem is that we have to build solutions that don't raise the threshold for Small and Medium Enterprises to compete for government purchases. So any system has to be very easy to use.

Regarding the future, European eProcurement confronts several challenges in the field of catalogues, signatures and standards. These challenges have to be faced to prevent interoperability barriers. Else there exists a danger that all the different member states will build eProcurement solutions focused **on servicing their own national companies and citizens**. It is perfectly possible for a Belgian company to participate in a Belgian eProcurement process,



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because we can identify that company easily. But at this moment in time a Portuguese company would still have to send in everything on paper. **The same goes for all the services we provide to citizens based on their use of an electronic id-card.**

5. EUROPE : AVOIDING NEW BARRIERS

Few European Member States are planning to distribute Electronic ID-cards to all their citizens, and governments that want do so, are often faced with a quite strong opposition to the whole idea. But there should be a way to identify citizens from any foreign country. We're now building a solution that accepts social security number or drivers licence numbers as a weak way to identify a person, but ideally it should be possible to recognize foreign citizens in a more secure way.

If Europe doesn't step up its efforts, e-government could become a threat rather than an asset for the free movement of people and capital within the European Union. We may have removed physical borders, but we are running the risk of building new electronic barriers instead.

The whole idea behind Europe is that countries that trade intensively with each other won't fight each other. With the whole enlargement of the E.U. to 25 Member States, it's crucial that the companies and people can do business anywhere in the Union.

We have set up a small Public Private Partnership for the first phases of our eProcurement programme. A company that is specialized in assisting enterprises in their public procurement activities has built an application where all regional and local government bodies can publish their tenders digitally. For us it was a relatively low cost solution, where we had to guarantee the security and confidentiality of the data up to the moment of publication.

You undoubtedly have noticed that I don't have an IT-background myself. In fact, there are very few IT-experts in the Flemish public sector. **The Flemish government has decided in 1995 to outsource its IT-department almost completely.** For the duration of a 5 year contract, one single IT-company is our main service provider. But this puts an extra responsibility on the administration to define their projects very precisely, to monitor the progress carefully and to audit the deliverables. Because the public will only hold the government and the administration responsible for any malfunction or breach of privacy, and not the IT company who built it.

WRAPPING UP A. (4 minutes)

I said that IT shouldn't take the lead in government departments. That was an easy answer, and not entirely correct. I do think it's true for the **old type of IT-department**, the engineers running the mainframes. **The people more involved in the "how" than in the "what" or "why".** But that kind of IT-department is on its way out anyway. Modern IT-managers do think in terms of the business their working for, and in the smarter organizations they're part of the management team. And from their understanding of the business strategy, and their experience in IT they are wholly participating in the debate of what should be done and how to do it.



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I started this talk stating that the IT community should listen more carefully to the business people in the administration before it starts proposing solutions. **But the same goes for the relationship between the government and the public, citizens, enterprises or organizations.** If you want to provide good services to your customers it's a lot safer to know as precisely as possible what they want. Not that it's a general rule. If you have been communicating with your citizens via paper forms, it's generally a good idea to provide them with a simple digital form. Or even better, no form at all and to abolish the need for an application all together. Within our social security framework hundreds of forms have been abolished, which, by the way, explains why Belgium doesn't rank very high in international benchmarks. Most of them measure online services, and you don't get points for not bothering your citizens at all. But to really know if anybody is waiting for my bright new idea to set up an online reservation system for childcare, it might be wise to first ask young parents and the childcare providers before we start building it.

I'm personally not fond of big investments in what's called "E-democracy". We've had web-referenda, political discussion forums, some countries experiment with internet-elections. By the way, there's a true technological and political challenge. **How do you set up a voting system, that's secure, trustworthy, respects the anonymity of the vote but does check if someone hasn't voted twice and allow for a count and a recount?**

Most of these projects started top down from politicians who see the Internet as a sort of life buoy to get in touch with the public in this moment of history everybody claims politicians are out of touch with the people. I think that thesis is not correct to start with, but it will certainly not be helped by setting up specially designated places where the citizens can discuss politics. I haven't seen big successes in that field, certainly not in terms of representativity. And as any politician will confirm, it's hard to find out what the public wants.

Sometimes it's really the little details that make the difference between a successful and a failed project. Is it something our customers need, or something the administration needs? When e-government projects amount to little more than **digitizing bureaucracy**, they're bound to be unsuccessful.

WRAPPING UP B. (1 minute)

In my final round after the bell I'd would summarize what I've said shortly.

- **Build your strategy around what is good for your citizens**, not around the interests of your IT-department or even worse, around an IT-product
- There is much to be gained by **integrating government services**. E-government is basically a programma to let the people be. Behind your portal there has to be a strong interaction between government agencies. **Don't ask what you already know.**
- And for the IT-people in the room : **be very smart**. You remember that if Henry Ford had asked people what they wanted, they would have said "faster horses". And that brings me back to my starting point. IT-people should talk to their customers. But when we answer "faster horses", do ask us, computer illiterates, what do we need that horse for.



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In all likelihood, we'll answer that we need to get somewhere faster and more comfortable than the way we're doing it today. And then I'm sure the IT-department can come up with exactly the right solutions to get me where I truly want to be.

Geert Mareels

