



Public Sector Reform Column



E-Government and the Digital Divide

A new major e-government reform project is underway with the rolling out of The Enabling Environment for Private Sector Investment (EEPSI). EEPSI aims to fill the gap between the technology haves and have-nots, a new era often referred to as the digital divide.

One-Stop Solutions

The Industry & International Business Division within the Ministry of Economic Development is implementing a new style of customer focused services, realising its ability to provide government services through nontraditional electronic means. This e-reform has the potential to reshape the public service and build relationships between investors, citizens and government. EEPSI is an ambitious e-governance project, which seeks to improve the investment process. EEPSI will provide a speedy transparent process for the dissemination of information and complete government transactions within Barbados by linking fourteen critical Government ministries, departments and agencies on a single network 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, internationally via the internet.

Changing Trends

There is no doubt that the emergence of the internet as a tool of communication, knowledge and entertainment is perhaps the most significant change in global communications which has taken place in our lifetime. Barbadians have embraced this technology wholeheartedly, so much so that it was recently estimated that some 60% of our population has access to the internet at any given time. This represents a very significant level of connectivity in this region. The use of the internet medium is now a standard means of communication for living and working.

The Role of EEPSI

In today's world, business and investment decisions, whether national or international, are increasingly being made on the basis of information which is readily available on-line. International investors from the developed world are impatient for information and are no longer prepared to wait a day or two for faxed responses to basic information from a potential jurisdiction. Also, citizens increasingly expect the same level of service from government as they do from other organisations. Communication with other public service departments is vital, but is presently limited to a paper system. This is not to the advantage of people in a globalised world who are unwilling to fill out lengthy forms, stand in long lines and wait days and weeks for a response from a government department. The EPPSI project seeks to deal with these issues in an effective manner.

A New Focus

The Government of Barbados intends as part of a strategy for development to utilise all available new and emerging technologies to improve regional and international competitiveness as well as to enhance the quality of life in Barbados as a whole. In light of this, Government has recognised the importance of developing e-governance in Barbados. Government departments are thinking differently about their roles and are becoming active players, proactively developing and managing different frameworks to respond to growing expectations of service quality. These departments are also thinking differently about their service-users. The aim of reform programmes is to make public services more responsive to the needs of the people who use them. Service providers now regard public service users as customers and clients and are making serious attempts to find out their expectations.

Functions of EEPSI

EEPSI will allow different entities to track investor details for which they are responsible by placing all the necessary information about the investment decision on-line. EEPSI will ensure that applications and other licenses have been dealt with along each stage of the investment process required within Barbados and at the same time improve the response times of each agency to a potential investor. In addition, an EEPSI entity is able to communicate

via email, thereby allowing speedier response to queries, which maybe made by the connected entities and investors.

Change Management

The training requirements for EEPSI are not being overlooked. The training of staff in the government agencies using EEPSI is considerable in terms of the number of staff and the various software applications. Further hands-on, one to one training will be required, since officers at the entities involved may change as time progresses. A strong emphasis has been placed on training staff on issues of change management. This involves developing and nurturing the individual mindsets of staff, where they are encouraged to re-focus on their roles and how they perform their responsibilities.

The Benefits

The successful implementation of the EPPSI project will bring benefits to the wider public service and its customers. The benefits include:

- Improved response times to investor communiqués;
- Improved customer service by the Public Sector Agencies to the international community;
- Readily available information;
- Reduction in information redundancy;
- Reduction of unnecessary bureaucratic red tape;
- Enhanced transparency and accountability;
- Improved efficiency of public sector workers; and
- Effective linkages relating to the investment process between Ministries and Departments.

The Way Forward

Like many projects of a similar scale, the rolling out of EEPSI has brought many challenges. The project team had to meet these challenges with workable, effective solutions from inception to implementation. There is no doubt that EEPSI and other similar reform

initiatives are the way for the future, as Barbados needs to become more competitive within its region and the emerging global order. EEPSI strives to eradicate the bottlenecks, which choke economic expansion by snarling investment both locally and internationally.

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