

# Public Sector Accountability: Can IT Deliver?

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## Information, Technology and Accountability

If 'electronic government' means anything, it means the use of IT to help deliver the goals of public sector reform. These goals can include decentralisation, higher quality public services ... and increased accountability that will make public servants more accountable for their decisions and actions. But can IT deliver on this last goal?

There are many cases in which IT has helped. In the UK, for example, IT-based systems have helped increase the accountability of new public agencies to their political masters in central government through improved reporting of expenditure. The same has also been true, say, in Tanzania, where IT-based systems have helped increase accountability of government departments to major external finance providers like the World Bank and the IMF.

Yet IT is not a necessary part of the accountability equation. The recent mass movements behind government accountability in India, for instance, have involved citizen meetings, typed reports and, at their most high-tech, the use of photocopiers - but not a computer in sight.

Why? Because it is information, not technology, that is essential to accountability. Information about the performance of services and programmes, decisions and actions must flow from public servants to those who would hold them accountable. But these information flows do not have to be supported by IT.

## Problems for IT and Accountability

When accountability information flows are supported by IT, problems sometimes arise.

First, because IT seems to be skewing the balance of public sector accountabilities. To understand this, we must first understand the accountabilities of public servants. The accountabilities include:

- *Managerial accountability* to senior public managers.
- *Legal accountability* to the judiciary.
- *Professional accountability* to peer group members.
- *Public accountability* to citizens and clients.
- *Financial accountability* to finance providers, such as central government or aid donors.
- *Political accountability* to politicians and the legislature.

In many cases, application of IT has not been equally divided between these various accountabilities. Instead, IT-based accountability systems have largely been funded by finance providers to support financial accountability. Public managers increasingly attend to these systems and, given their limited attention capacity, start to ignore their other accountabilities, especially public accountability. In sum, despite rhetoric that 'the citizen is king', IT is making public organisations more accountable to central government or to aid donors, and less accountable to the general public. Only a significant investment in electronic public accountability systems will redress this growing imbalance.

Worse, though, the qualities of IT have a tendency to fundamentally undermine accountability. Where public managers lack a clear records management strategy, computerisation has often been associated with diminution or even loss of paper records-keeping. Yet computer records, because of their intangibility and malleability, are a far poorer basis for accountability than paper records.

'The medium is the message' and the message of electronic media is one of truth, objectivity and credibility. So, when often-inaccurate public sector data is produced by computerised accountability systems it gains a mask of objectivity and an aura of credibility that it does not deserve. Recipients can be led to believe in the validity of invalid accountability information, thus undermining the process of accountability.

Finally, the overall growth of 'electronic government' itself is problematic. As public sector computing spreads up and out from its original clerical automation applications, it will increasingly make an input to managerial decision-making. This leads to a confusion and undermining of accountability because - to the delight of lawyers worldwide - there is no clear answer to the question:

"Who is to be held accountable when computerised information systems in the public sector are involved in decisions and subsequent actions that are judged to be sub-standard?"

IT may therefore support the accountability component of public sector reform, but it may equally skew or undermine it.

## **Delivering Accountability**

So, if IT is no panacea for delivering on accountability, what factors are important? Two related factors can be identified.

The first is consensus among powerful stakeholders about the desirability of accountability. Take the example of a public sector railway system in Asia. Computerisation was to be introduced to increase the accountability (and decrease the fraudulence) of ticket sales. However, the powerful stakeholders - in this case stationmasters - desired an increase in the accountability of clerical staff but no increase in their own accountability. Computerisation was only able to proceed successfully once the system was redesigned to automate clerical procedures but to leave the activity of stationmasters untouched.

Electronic accountability initiatives (and, indeed, electronic government initiatives more broadly) must therefore start with stakeholder values, culture and self-interests. Where IT supports these interests, it is likely to succeed, albeit at a cost of delivering more limited organisational goals. Where IT conflicts with these interests, failure is the most likely outcome.

The second factor is the approach that public officials take to information age reform. We can characterise a 'four-eyes' model of different possible approaches:

- *Ignore*: Public officials are ignorant about IT and about information. They therefore do not include consideration of either in their plans for public sector reform.
- *Isolate*: Public officials remain computer-illiterate and lack an understanding of information's role. They nevertheless are aware of IT and its potential. Investment in IT is therefore included in reform plans - often as an afterthought - but is seen as the separate responsibility of 'IT experts'. It is not linked in any systematic way to the process of public sector reform.
- *Idolise*: Public officials have become semi-literate. They use computers and are over-aware of IT's potential. They believe that IT can transform the business of the public sector (or at least transform their own career prospects if they are seen to initiate a high-profile IT project). They are dimly aware that information is something important.
- *Integrate*: Public officials have become information-literate. They recognise information as a key organisational resource that is central to all public sector functions. IT is relegated to a secondary role: it is seen as a valuable means to achieve certain reform ends, not as an end in itself. The reengineering of information systems and the introduction of IT are now fully integrated into the process of organisational change, driven by reform objectives.

Many of the problems of accountability skews and undermining arise because officials adopt an 'isolate' or 'idolise' approach to this strand of information age reform. They must be educated to adopt an integrated approach which places the goal of accountability first, reengineered information flows second, and which removes any sense that computerisation *per se* is a goal of the public sector.

Combined with the issue of consensus, this produces a four-step approach:

1. Acceptance by key stakeholders of the need for accountability reform.
2. Identification and communication of an agenda for accountability reform.
3. Identification of the new and/or reengineered information systems requirements of this accountability reform agenda.
4. Identification of the role, if any, that information technology has to play in meeting these requirements.

In this way, the 'IT tail' no longer wags the 'accountability dog'.

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More details can be found in the following online working papers:

[Information Age Reform of the Public Sector: The Potential and Problems of IT for India](#)

[Information Systems and Public Sector Accountability](#)

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