

Twenty Five Steps towards e-Governance Failure

Author: Sameer Sachdeva

Designation: Manager (Marketing and Customer Care), NISG – Hyderabad

Contact: National Institute for Smart Government (NISG),
B Block, IIIT Campus, GachiBowli, Hyderabad - 500019 (AP) INDIA
Tel. 91 40 2300 6683-84, 2983-84, Fax 91 40 2300 6685
Mob: 9312013622
E-Mail: sameer@nisg.org , sachdeva_sameer@yahoo.co.in

About the Author

Sameer has a graduation in Electrical Engineering from CRSCE, Haryana and Post Graduation in Management from IIT Roorkee. He has over four year of work experience which includes his association with Tata Consultancy Services, Department of Information Technology, GOI and Department of Administrative Reforms, GOI. He has also been awarded by National IT Council, Malaysia for his contribution in online discussions. Sameer has co-authored two books in e-Governance – “e-Governance in Asia” and “State, IT and Development” He is currently looking after the marketing and business development activities at NISG and is company’s contact in Delhi. He is the founder and moderator of India’s first ever e-group on e-governance <http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/india-egov/>

Executive Summary

It is said that majority of e-Governance projects are complete or partial failures. Only a fraction of projects are actually successful. Some projects are complete wasteful as in they engage Government resources but no results on Government Optimization are achieved. There are other projects which are termed as pointless wherein Government Optimization is achieved but no development takes place even after optimization. A third category is of the meaningful projects wherein both the optimization of Government projects and development takes place.

The reasons for failure of e-Governance projects are anything but technological. Technology solutions are available and developed for any problem. But as they say, it is not the machine but the man behind the machine that leads to success or failure. This paper looks into the various causes that leads to e-Governance failure. Most of the causes are derived from authors' experience in the Indian environment but may be applicable in other developing nations as well.

The paper highlights that the administrative culture in India is scaling down the innovation in India. It highlights that the administrative culture is the reason why Indians innovate better abroad than they are able to do in India. The Indian system is such that all officials are expected to obey rules or follow precedence. Innovation involves changing the rules of the game and/or breaking with tradition. Both ways, the Indian ethos rules out originality and innovation.

The author shares a few of experiences wherein he relates how the administrative culture lead to difficulties in project implementation and killed the innovation. However without prejudice he wants to acknowledge that winds of change have swept the whole system and the system is fast changing.

Twenty Five Steps towards e-Governance Failure

Twenty five steps towards e-Governance failure is a sequel to the paper Twenty five steps towards successful e-Governance. e-Governance projects may fail due to multiple reasons and the reasons listed are neither comprehensive nor complete. A few individuals may feel that certain causes are non existence while others may feel that more can be added. The paper is an attempt to enlist possible causes of failure of various e-Governance projects.

1. Planning To Fail or Fail To Plan

The first step in any project is to plan the project. The success of the project will depend on the skill and expertise with which it is planned and conceptualized. It is often felt that Government Department shy away from spending a few lakhs in preparation of project plans for e-Governance projects worth hundreds of crores. And at times unskilled individual decides the plan and they plan fail. The plans are made without clear objectives, unclear roles and responsibilities. There are no parameters for financial controls. Areas like risk assessment, feasibility assessment, prioritization and strategy are not even thought lest be addressed completely. So, whereas there exists no plan in some projects, in others the planning is done for failure.

2. Mission Impossible

Another cause of project failure is to visualize the impossible. The project consultants as hired by various Government Departments generally promise the moon to the departments. They expect that whatever they suggest will be implemented in Government without realizing the fact that the Government has its on limitations. At times there are procedural and departmental constraints, other times legal constraints and at times even constitutional constraints. Consultants without even realizing the ground reality propose solutions which are redundant, non practical and non achievable. As a result their reports lie in the shelves of Government Officers catching dusts. There always exists a vision and reality gap between what is proposed and what can be implemented. The initial over expectations created by consultants leads to

difficulties in managing customer expectations later. The reality and Vision gap is the second step towards e-Governance failure

3. Misunderstanding Governance

The consultants taken by the Government at time totally misunderstand the Governance process and the institution of Government. They do not realize that the Government will be governed by constitution and the laws therein. A simple example from India is that the consultants most often suggest centralized e-Governance solutions without realizing that India is a federal state and there is clear distinction of subjects between state and centre in the constitution. To implement a solution as suggested by them will require constitutional amendments which are not easy to implement. Consultants feel that Government will change according to the solution suggested by them. They have an impression that Government has to fit into their solution and not vice versa. In reality they have to actually ensure that their solutions fit into Government needs. Further the consultants do not realize that Government is a complex structure which has existed over years and any big changes are very difficult to implement. There are other political, social, economic, security constraints for the Government leading to certain changes totally unacceptable. Therefore whatever solutions are suggested have to be after proper understanding the Government and its complexities. Misunderstanding Government and Governance is third step leading to e-Governance projects to fail.

4. Bottleneck is at the top of Bottle, Always

It is often sited that the project has failed because the staff at the lower level is not ready to adapt to the computerized environment. However in Indian scenario the success of computerization in Indian Posts, Indian Railways and Public Sector Banks has proved otherwise. Therein the staff at the bottom is also using computers and the changes are very fast. Then why the changes in various Government Departments are not taking place. It is more because of the top leadership. The departments in Government of India are mostly headed by individuals who are near to their retirement. Majority of the Secretaries, as they are termed have just few months in service and therefore they are not keen on any new initiative or a reform process. This has been happening since many years. The top officials are lovers of

status quo and develop resistance to change. With no support from the top leadership the e-Governance projects do not get encouragement and therefore meet death. Further even if one secretary is reformist there will be new secretary to take his place within two months who will bring back the British legacy of working. Further at times there are individuals and vested interests who try to de-rail the projects. At time the leadership appointed for project coordination is inadequate and unskilled. The resistance created by top leadership is the fourth step towards e-Governance failure.

5. Vendor Driven e-Governance

It was a shock to the whole nation when one of the leading names in consultancy published a report and stated that e-Governance in India is Vendor Driven. It was then realized that in multiple e-Governance projects the vendors for hardware, databases, operating systems, software applications etc were driving e-Governance. The Government Officials in most cases were misled to believe that the vendor's solutions were the e-Governance solutions. Not to say what made Government Officials to believe those vendors. Vendors in a quest to sell their solutions, sold anything and every thing to the Government. The author recalls that in an instance multiple copies of Voice to Text software were bought by a Department as e-Governance application. Needless to say, they were never used and Personal Secretaries continued to take dictations. Vendor driven e-Governance therefore is the fifth cause that leads to failure in e-governance projects.

6. Focus on 'e' than Governance

Every seminar, every author, every Government Officer stresses that e-Governance is more about Governance than 'e'. However the implementers in Government have not realized the importance of same. Majority of the nations across the world have their e-Governance initiatives spearhead from the Ministries of Information Technology, as if e-Governance is about IT and not Governance. It is not realized that for successful implementation of the e-Governance program the program managing unit must be placed under the Prime Minister or the President to lead to successful implementation. The team for this program management

unit must comprise of individuals with experience in diverse Government background. In many countries it had been observed that the teams are drawn from electronics and IT background which may lead to skewed implementation challenges. Further it must be realized that e-Governance is beyond Internet Governance. In a nation there are very few people who have access to internet and very few who are internet users amongst them and further few who use internet for e-Governance. Therefore e-Governance solutions must be planned with multiple access facilities. Focus on IT and electronics is the sixth and most important causes of failure of e-Governance.

7. Employees as Stakeholder Universe

Majority of the projects take Government employees as the only stakeholders. The consultation process happens with the Senior Government Employees and rest stakeholders are neglected. The Government Departments feel that they know all the requirements of the stakeholders and therefore it is useless spending time on such project. Despite the lectures on outside in approach, the projects are actually conceptualized on inside out approach only. It is only the Senior Employees who take the decision. Further at times the Departments are even scared that if they get into stakeholder consultations there will be lot of resistance from other stakeholders and the project will end before it takes off. The Departments in this case do not realize that they will face higher resistance from these stakeholders at the time of implementation and they will also not be able to capture their needs properly. The Department/Client remains satisfied with the consultant for it is giving answers to all the problems of one stakeholder that is the project leader or in better case his Department, neglecting other stakeholders. The consultant is happy because it is saving its time and resources on stakeholder consultation. Therefore the stakeholder universe limited to employees is another cause of failure.

8. Lets Build Rome in a Day

Most e-Governance Projects are given unachievable timelines. Most of the time Ministers or leaders make announcements and the deadlines than the quality become key challenge in

project implementation. For a project to be successful and error free minimum time is required. Taj Mahal the Best Project in the world took 17years and 20,000 workers to be completed. Even though we may not require 17 years now but two to three years is minimum time for an e-Governance project to actually be ready to be launched from its planning. It may take another two to three years for training and adoption of the project by all stakeholders. A change is not easy to implement and we must be patient in implementing change via e-Governance. The time taken will further help to improve and rectify the project. Unachievable timelines and race to achieve them is further a cause of e-Governance failure.

9. Individualized (not institutionalized) Projects

Most of the e-Governance projects are individual driven. There are even statements and suggestions by various Government Departments that the tenure of e-Governance project leaders should be fixed for the timeframe of the project. But the approach of individualizing the projects is not appropriate and leads to project failures. The project leaders who institutionalize projects are better project leaders than anyone else. The projects which are driven by individuals die after the individuals leave the organizations. But projects which have been institutionalized stay for ever. The National e-Governance Plan in India has been institutionalized by setting up of an e-Governance Program Management Unit (EGMPU) which is one of the initiative towards institutionalization of e-Governance in India. However the states still follow the individualized e-Governance which leads to failure after the e-champions leaves.

10. Procedural Loops

The procedural loops are another hindrance in the e-Governance project implementation. All projects need to go through a competitive bidding process which may take even more time than the implementation of the project. At times the project approval time is even more than the implementation time. There will be an EOI advertised, there will be an expert committee to evaluate, RFPs will be released, Pre bid Conferences held, Project consultant is selected than financial approvals are taken and so on. There will be a steering committee, a standing committee, a working group and many others who will involved in just the approvals and

procedures of the projects. At times the project files keep on moving between one department and another or one table to other. Such procedural delays often lead to failure of projects. The Government procedures are highlighted in following statement:

"The Government has this morning formed an anti-corruption squad to look into the conduct of the anti-corruption commission, which has been overseeing the anti-corruption task force, which was earlier set to investigate the affairs of a Government ad hoc committee appointed earlier this year to look into the issue of high-level corruption among corrupt Government officers."

11. Witch-hunting reformers

Witch hunting of the reformers is another constraint in e-Governance implementation. The reformists generally take decisions for quick implementation of the projects but later face various inquiries from various agencies and seniors. But that does not mean that the individuals who commit frauds in name of reforms should be let free. One criteria that can easily distinguish a true reformist from a fraud is the success/ failure of e-governance initiatives. Individuals who collide with private sector will not be able to give any result in the projects. Author recalls from his personal experience that one of the Department finally closed many such initiatives by individual who was misleading nation in name of reforms and e-Governance. However author also recalls certain vested interest launching a media campaign, e-mails against true champions of change. Should we decide the project success based on the feedback or satisfaction of two crore population on ground or comments of two individual online is to be thought of. Such misleading stories about individuals actually lead to a hindrance in development of nation and dampen the spirit of change leaders. No, individual thereafter comes forward to support the change. These vested interest who loose with change actually launch such campaign for their on personal gains and the vested / politicized media supports such individuals who sabotage the change process. Based on such reports the government agencies launch witch hunting the reformists and thereafter every new project leader is sacred to take projects. The e-Governance actually falls flat on such witch hunting.

"The reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new."

12. Front-office vs Back Office e-Governance

Unless the back end integration of systems take place, the front end efforts may not lead to any success. The integration of various departments, supporting applications and databases is must for true front office results. However in most cases various kiosks are established as example of e-governance in states. Such kiosks devoid of any backend integration just act as internet cafes or movies theatres. The true e-governance application will be achieved only when the front office is integrated with the backend application. Creating front offices without any back office integration is another cause of e-governance failure.

13. Unsustainable Business Model

Any business model which is not self supporting is never everlasting. The same applies to e-Governance projects as well. The Government Subsidized / funded projects may sail through for sometime but in long run may not sustain themselves. The projects actually require a business case, wherein even the private partners can participate and take the responsibility of project success.

14. Media Hype and Media Bite

Many project leaders today are taking projects to create media hype. They announce various initiatives just to remain in news. Projects are announced even before they are ready to be launch thereby creating lot of hype and over expectations amongst stakeholders. And as they say the bubble burst sooner or later, the true picture of projects is revealed with time. Not only the media hype is disadvantageous, so is the media bite. Many projects face problems wherein media over blows small errors. We must realize that e-governance is emerging area and it will be with these errors that the future systems will improve. However with false reporting in various media the projects many time faces lot of problems leading the project leaders into lot of problems.

15. e-Governance – vernance = EGO

If we remove “vernance” from e-Governance only e-Go is left. And one of the important cause of failure of e-Governance is EGO. Herein ego is not only of the individuals but of Government Departments as well. At times the line departments do not cooperate with the IT Department and feel that it is interference in their functioning. At times there is even conflict amongst various Departments for the subject allocation of e-Governance. All this lead to lot of EGO clashes and at times failure of e-Governance implementation. And in case a junior officer hurts the ego of a senior officer than he may be even thrown out leading to jeopardized e-governance.

16. Silos of Success

There are many e-governance projects which are successful as silos but when the integration with large projects is required these projects fail to deliver. Therefore the projects need to planned in such a way that tomorrow they may be integrated with other projects. It is easier to achieve a pilot say, on e-district but when it comes to full scale roll out of the same it is difficult. Similarly hundreds of NGO's have implemented many pilot projects based on kiosk model in India but have failed to roll out such projects. The projects succeed in the controlled environment but fails beyond it. The failure is evident not only with exceeding boundaries but also with time. One of the international award winning project of India died a natural death within few years. Therefore much e-Governance failure may be attributed to silos of successes.

17. Politics of e-Governance

The vote bank politics and politics of governance is another cause of e-Governance failure. One of the former Chief Minister in one of the states of India, discarded computers as fad of riches. His voters who constituted mostly of illiterate population of the state would not have got any advantage of e-governance and therefore he would not have got any votes out of IT. No doubt the state remained the last in the annual e-readiness assessment done by the Union's

Department of Information Technology. Many initiatives initiated by one of the reformer and former Chief Minister in a southern state in India were rolled back or scaled down by new CM. In one of the projects in the Capital state of India the opposition took charges of corruption up to the legislative assembly. In another case a PIL has been filed by certain vested interests to derail a prestigious project of a southern state. At times there are politics amongst the officers as well wherein one officer tries to sabotage projects initiated by another. At times rumors of corruption are spread by various vested interests. The politics of e-Governance is a very important aspect and should not be neglected else it may become a cause of e-governance failure.

18. Award driven projects

Certain e-Governance projects are now started just for getting nominations in awards. They are conceptualized with a view that they fit into the category of awards of various international agencies and national departments. More importance is given to writing project entries than the implementation of projects. The multiplicity of such awards have further added to above problem of award driven initiatives. In India the e-Governance awards are instituted by many organizations – one of the GOI department, one national IT magazine, one of the IT association, one of the consultancy organization and may be many more. Last year the Department award as many as twenty five awards. Further the awards are generally awarded by the project entry as submitted and not by ground level investigation. This leads to e-Governance leaders spending more time on making award entries than implementing projects. A project may be highlighted as an award winning project abroad but at ground level it may have failed to deliver any benefit to stakeholders. Further the actual successful projects are not even awarded. The race for awards may at times become a stumbling block in e-Governance success.

19. PPP Misinterpreted

The concept of PPP is often misinterpreted to mean Public Money for Private Partners. Infact the projects where the private partners are dependent on Government money are not true PPP

projects. True Public Private Partnership is an equal investment of private partners in Government projects. This partnership may be in form of manpower, technology, resources etc. However various groups interpret that by involving the private partner the Government is draining public money to private partner. Therefore care must be taken on proper implementation of such partnerships. A failure in associating with a right partner may lead to project failure.

20. Big Bang e-Governance

One needs to learn to walk before one starts running. The radical changes in Government through e-Governance may lead to lot of resistance to change and there Governments must opt for sequential change. Radical changes may fall as they are difficult to implement and may lead to lot of resistance. The best approach in e-Governance implementation is to think big, start small and scale fast. The big bang approach must be avoided as it may lead to failure.

21. Neglected Advocacy

Inadequate stakeholder communication and lack of advocacy is another step towards the failure of e-Governance initiatives. The neglected advocacy may lead to gaps in perception in various stakeholders and their expectations. The advocacy efforts right from the beginning will help the project acceptability at a later stage. Advocacy is necessary even for the internal employees of the organization. The champions of change may lead an advocacy campaign for the e-Governance project acceptability. Neglected Advocacy is a big cause of e-Governance failure.

22. Budget Utilization Syndrome

The annual budget allocation for any head in Indian Government lapses at the end of each financial year. Further if funds allocated in one year remain un-utilized it is very difficult to get funds under the same head in the next financial year. Majority of the Government Departments who have IT funds allocation therefore spend a lot of funds on purchasing of Hardware in

month of March without realizing that the hardware as purchased will be required for future or not. This race to spend funds without purpose defeats the purpose of many e-Governance initiatives. The project runs into costs overshoots because of purchase of unnecessary hardware. The hardware becomes technologically outdated by the time the application is developed. The budget utilization syndrome is therefore another cause of e-Governance failure.

23. Large, complex Centralized systems

Visualizing large complex centralized projects may also lead to project failure. Such projects not only take long time to implement but because of their cross departmental linkages are difficult to implement. Projects which spread over various levels of Government are further complex and complicated. The integration of Federal, State and Local Government is not only complex but difficult to implement. Therefore the feasibility of such projects is the most important in the whole process. The projects have to be implemented with proper planning otherwise these large, complex and centralized systems may fail to deliver the local needs.

24. Reverse Re-engineering

Reverse Engineering is a concept wherein a solution is already suggested and then the need for that solution is analyzed. In one of the project a department suggested they have decided to give smart cards to its stakeholders and wanted an organization to suggests which cards may be given and what application may be incorporated. The department failed to understand that the smart cards may not actually be the right solution for the needs of their stakeholders. Such reverse re-engineering is not only fatal but leads to project failure.

25. Blame game e-Governance

Everyone takes credit for success and no one takes responsibility for failure. There are e-Governance projects which may end up in some bottlenecks and at time are handed to new teams. New teams instead of building already fallen system generally start a blame game that

the previous team this and that. The system lacked such multiple applications, is having security loop holes etc. The first team blames the second and second the first. The blame games ends up in complete failure of the project.

Concluding Remarks

Even though the papers highlights the various causes of failure but the effort will be incomplete without enlisting the possible solutions for the various causes of failure. Firstly the e-gov projects should be properly conceptualized and planned. If required help of an external agency may be taken. While defining the scope of the project the situation on the ground may be considered and efforts must also be taken to ensure to understand the limitations in which the Government operates. The top leadership should be highly motivated for the project. The efforts should be to concentrate on Governance than on IT component. Vendor driven projects should not be considered at all. Further it is better to lapse the Department Budget than to purchase unwanted stuff from the same. The consultation should be spread over all stakeholders and proper timelines should be kept. Efforts should be to institutionalized the projects than individualize it. The projects should automatically continue even after the individuals leave. Government must respect innovation and protect the reformers. The politics of e-Governance must be avoided and it should be ensured that there are no blame games. Radical and big changes must be discouraged and sudden surprises must be left out of scope of e-Governance. Efforts should be there to have right public private partners who may lead to e-Governance success. In short the twenty five pitfalls as mentioned above must be avoided to succeed in e-Governance implementation.