

The Intelligent Province

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The current situation of Government IT is one of distributed systems and processes: The three tiers of government have their own ranges of computing centres, and the different departments (Health, Education) etc. have their separate systems. In short, there is a proliferation of hardware and software and especially datasets, and a lot of duplicated data entry and effort.

All these Departments, on the various levels of government, are there to serve the same people, and great savings could be achieved and much better and more comprehensive service levels could be attained by rationalising the systems and making use of a common pool of information.

The data, and services concerned, could more logically be grouped into

- Citizen information (info on persons);
- Enterprise information;
- Land information.

His department aims at developing a common infrastructure, an information superhighway in its own right, which should also connect into the World-wide Information Superhighway. The challenges are the need for rapid reconstruction and development, the skills shortage, budget constraints, communication within and between the various components of government and the need for economic development.

The Information Technology infrastructure must support the private sector and NGOs in order for SA to make rapid progress in the global economy. Government IT must help them draw on the R&D efforts in the country, much R&D requires resources, not in the least computer resources, that are unaffordable to individual industries, even large companies.

The citizen information database could include various interaction points between the government and the citizens, comprising: Water & electricity bills; Passports, birth certificates etc.; Motor vehicle registrations; Business licenses; Housing; Tax returns; Taxes; Pensions - all these connected to a common hub, allowing single point interaction for citizens.

Information Technology should concentrate on Dissemination of information, not on data processing. People must be able to have access to all sorts of information. He hoped for a lot of interaction with librarians, serving as community centre facilitators. The library should be part of the grid, being the place where citizens could benefit from all the information to be disseminated, and being able to make inputs of their own.

Mr Patel warmly invited everybody to make inputs and come up with suggestions and ideas. He stressed the fact that the new government processes encompassing Green papers, white papers, etc. was designed to make it possible for all citizens to make their inputs and make sure their ideas and suggestions would become part of the decision

processes. He urged all present to make use of the system.

Louis van der Merwe continued: The past (history) has left us with: distributed, fragmented cities; urban sprawl; environmental degradation and structural problems. The new world order is based on knowledge and information. South Africa's environmental constraints makes it imperative for us to embrace this concept.

He indicated that governments are generally slow to embrace change. Is it possible for government to run its activities electronically? The situation is such that government services just have to be digitised and streamlined. We have to use the tools available if we want to share in the benefits of the new world order (if we want to survive at all?) He stressed that IT must be development oriented, it cannot be there for its own sake. It must contribute to the advancement of society as a whole.

We need to reinvent our information delivery systems, as they presently are not working well, and we need to reduce cost. (IT could be a means to meet both these requirements).

He touched on the role of traditional labour in the context of this new, information based economy. His opinion was that information technology can actually help make better use of existing resources, to benefit small-scale operations (example: Hydroponics could make it possible to economically run small-scale farming in areas where presently only large-scale farming works, due to water scarcity). Initiative and innovative approaches must be stimulated, information is a means to this end.

He also stressed that a low-wage economy cannot progress in the long run - we need to move away from this situation as fast as possible by embracing high-tech solutions. He showed a slide with projected road developments to promote industry and economic progress in the Gauteng region. His contention was that instead of building physical roads, one should try to build information networks that could handle many of the needs, independently of physical roads.

Questions:

One of the questions concerned the comparison (touched upon by the speakers) with the development in Malaysia and wondered about the preparedness of people to embrace the technology. Mr Patel stressed that the differences in cultural background, attitudes and infrastructure are enormous, but we must see to it that we get to where we want to be.

Another question concerned the costs to, e.g., schools to get connected to the Internet. How can we dream about joining the information community if the barriers are so high? Mr Patel suggested that there are other ways and means than a dial-up telephone line to achieve this and recommended contacts with the Dept of Education, which has a section for solving such problems in a cost-effective way.

This gave rise to a comment that the communication to schools and individuals is not satisfactory - how are people to know that these possibilities exist? One question regarding the relation between information content and IT - how do we populate the systems with useful content - this is the expensive and difficult part, which people tend to forget in their enthusiasm for IT.

The reply was that there is a lot of information in existence already, which needs to be redeployed. The problem often lies in the unwillingness of organisations to share their information, since information is power and has economic value. Ways must be found to share information in ways that do not allow access to the crucial bits of data, and where the ownership of data is maintained.

One comment informed the participants that initiatives were already afoot to supply IT

to disadvantaged communities, 40 intelligent terminals being installed at present through the provincial library services.

Mr Patel also stressed that there was a need to ensure that not only *disadvantaged communities* are made to advance - there must be advancement among all communities, if we are to advance as a whole.

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