E-Governance in Slovenia: Part II

Survey research shows progress and gaps in the Slovenian public sector's citizen-centered e-communication transformation.

by Uroš Pinterič

This article is the second of four in a series on e-governance in Slovenia. It addresses two-way communication between citizens and different levels of public administration, a key element of effective e-governance.

Today's best practice thinking in public management promotes efficient and effective communication with citizens. Empirical research shows discrepancies between theory and practice in Slovenia, especially in the use of e-mail at the local level. On the other hand, the situation is much better at the central level of administration, particularly in the so-called administrative units, which have the most frequent contact with Slovenian citizens.

Method

To launch our survey on e-communication between public agencies and citizens, we sent e-mails with relevant questions to general e-mail addresses (not individuals) of important public administration and government institutions. At the time of our survey, the law required that public organizations respond to or act on citizen requests within thirty days of receiving an e-mail. After our survey, the Slovenian government adopted new regulatory procedures that reduced the time allotted for answering citizens' e-mails to fifteen days and required responses by e-mail.

We sent these e-mails to different institutions as if we were ordinary citizens inquiring into basic information government offices could share. Our e-communications came without any special warning or indication that our principal focus was actually the organization's response time and customer service behavior itself.

In the survey, we wanted to learn whether key organizations affected by these requirements are responding effectively and in a user-friendly way. This includes institutions contacted most commonly by citizens (administrative units) and those with a special role and open to the general public (national assembly). Accordingly, we sent e-mails to the following government addresses:

Number of e-mails	Government organization
58	All administrative units
14	All ministries
1	Prime Minister
1	Government of Republic of Slovenia
1	President of Republic of Slovenia
1	National Assembly
1	National Council
1	Ombudsman
11	All city municipalities[a]
24	Other municipalities (two from each of twelve statistical regions)[a]
113	Total

[a] In all, we sent e-mails to 35 of 193 Slovenian municipalities.

Thus, our distribution covered all main political-administrative institutions on the national level, their administrative infrastructures in the field, and other local-level entities representing 18 percent of all Slovenian municipalities. The survey followed Vintar and Kragelj's model of evaluating Slovenian govern-

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ment Web pages, one of whose criteria is also e-mail response time. The author used the same method to survey Slovenian municipalities in 2004.

Survey Results
Administrative Units

Administrative units are the part of the Slovenian public sector most commonly addressed by citizens because they provide most of the documentation needed from government (such as passports and drivers licenses). In this regard, the Slovenian government paid attention to automating all procedures driven by administrative units as well as related information technology support for citizens. We were able to send e-mails to all fifty-eight administrative units (except for one, which had the wrong address) and received answers from forty-four of fifty-seven, or 77 percent.

Overall, the results were quite satisfactory: more than three-fourths of the administrative units responded to our (citizen) e-mails. The response time was also quite satisfactory in most cases. Almost 48 percent sent us answers the same day. In two days, close to 80 percent had responded, and in five days (one week), 97.7 percent. In only one case did we receive an answer beyond the allotted time—on the forty-sixth day.

Progress at the National Level

The top echelon of the Slovenian public sector (14 ministries) and other major administrative-political institutions were much worse than others in replying to our e-mails. Within the thirty-day time frame, we received responses from only 50 percent of the administrative-political institutions and 53.8 percent of thirteen ministries (one ministry had published a wrong e-mail address). However, our survey was carried out before the government reorganization in October 2004.

For other administrative units, we received most answers in the first five days and all answers in fifteen days. In fact, about 70 percent of the answers were received in the first two days. The Prime Minister's and Ombudsman's offices demonstrated a high level of performance in their electronic communication with citizens. In the first case, the person responding for the Prime Minister's office apologized for getting back to us in eleven days and explained the delay. In the case of the Ombudsman, we were given a thorough answer concerning a problem we had raised with detailed information on possibilities for further action.

Municipal E-Communication Lags Behind

We conducted the last one-third of our survey using a sample of Slovenian municipalities. In this case, we sent e-mails to all eleven city municipalities (having a special status, additional tasks, and additional conditions to be recognized) and to twenty-four other municipalities, on the basis of geographical dispersion factors, across the country. We queried two municipalities (other then city municipalities) from each of twelve statistical regions. Together, our sample included 35 of the 193 Slovenian municipalities.

As expected, municipalities proved the weakest link in using information-communication technology. Two of thirty-five (5.7 percent) did not have published e-mail addresses on the Internet, and seven (20 percent) had published wrong e-mail addresses (one was a city municipality). As a result, we were able to send regular e-mails to twenty-six (74.3 percent) of the municipalities in our sample. And of the twenty-six expected answers, we received only eight (30.8 percent). Also, 75 percent of those eight answers arrived in less than five days; thus, we received answers from only 22.9 percent of our sample in that time frame.

These findings indicate a significant problem among the Slovenian municipalities in providing customer-friendly communication via e-mail. City municipalities had better results: we received answers from four of eleven (36.4 percent) city municipalities. Results among common municipalities were much lower: only four of twenty-four (16.7 percent) answered at all. This suggests that compared with administrative units, municipalities do not meet the basic standards of quality and client-friendly communication via e-mail currently expected of public servants.

As indicated earlier, a more complete survey of e-communication in Slovenian municipalities using the same method was already carried out in 2003. We indicated this problem at that time, and the results of this more recent survey indicate little or no change.

Other Quality Considerations

The complete survey picture reveals other perspectives on service quality. Our analysis shows that the weakest component of e-communication (especially e-mail) is municipalities, which also have the greatest number of incorrectly published e-mail addresses. On the other hand, the 2004 survey showed that administrative units provided a relatively sufficient level of quality communication with citizen-clients:

Answer	Number or percentage	Administrative unit	Municipality	Ministry	Other	Total
No	Number	13	18	6	3	40
	% organization type within answer	32.5	45	15	7.5	100
	% answer within organization type	22.4	51.4	42.9	50	35.4
Yes	Number	44	8	7	3	62
	% organization type within answer	71	12.9	11.3	4.8	100
	% answer within organization type	75.9	22.9	50	50	54.9
No e-address	Number		2			2
	% organization type within answer		100			100
	% answer within organization type		5.7			
Wrong e-address	Number	1	7	1		9
	% organization type within answer	11.1	77.8	11.1		100
	% answer within organization type	1.7	20	7.1		8
Total	Number	58	35	14	6	113
	% organization type within answer	51.3	31	12.4		
	% answer within organization type	100	100	100	100	100

Organization type (spanning Administrative unit, Municipality, Ministry, Other, Total).

Source: Author's 2004 research.

Theory and Practice

As the table shows, e-communication in the Slovenian public sector is not where its citizens (and the government) want it to be. Part of the reason could be our governmental transition, but that alone does not likely account for a 54.9 percent average response rate. And most e-mails were also sent to addresses that daily politics shouldn't much affect. As for the government's strategy on e-governance from 2001–04, which provided for better access for citizens via information technology, we can say that by the end of 2004 the strategy was only partly implemented—especially with respect to e-mail response time.

Only the administrative units show better results and more effective and client-friendly service to citizen-clients. The other segments of the public sector (not on the front lines of citizen information requests) are providing much less quick-and-easy information.

Although the type of organization seems an important factor, it did not statistically correlate with the quality of communication measured by e-mail response. Consequently, we can assume that the result is influenced by organizational culture—not only a certain type of organization, but individual organizations as well. One of most significant influences appears to be employee views concerning the role of information-communication technology and its relevance to an information society. Nevertheless, general Slovenian administrative units achieved about 20 percent better results in electronic communication than central political-administrative institutions and almost 50 percent better than municipalities.

Conclusion

From these results, we can say progress has been made in providing improved information services in Slovenia, yet more systematic efforts are needed to further improve the quality of these services. This is particularly true for municipalities, which have the necessary human and technical resources, but are lacking in "electronic literacy" as well as an understanding of a truly modern, customer-driven way of doing business.

Legal and technical frameworks are not enough to change practice. Indeed, administrative culture is still an important factor in implementing new public management and e-government approaches in Slovenia. More effort should be made to improve performance—especially in the case of municipalities' communication with citizens via electronic technology (e-mail). Government should also intensify efforts to constantly monitor public organization performance, far beyond the information collected from questionnaires completed by civil servants. ✧

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