OPEN: Seoul's Anticorruption Project

Abstract

The Municipal Government of Seoul, South Korea, crafted the OPEN system (Online Procedures ENhancement for Civil Applications) to target corruption. The system publishes a variety of information related to the services, permits and licenses issued by the local government. The status of an application can be tracked by the applicant on a web site. The system was recognized as a “Good Practice” at the 9th International Anti-Corruption Conference in Durban, South Africa in 1999.

Application Context

Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea, has a population of over 10 million. Rapid economic growth has been accompanied by an expansion of the municipal bureaucracy. However, extensive municipal regulations also created new opportunities for corruption. Some bribes were meant to be insurance fees to avoid unfavorable treatment, others were honorariums for preferential treatment, and still others were express fees to facilitate speedy processing.

A New Approach

With the inauguration of Mayor Goh in 1998, Seoul City declared an all-out war on corruption. Deregulation has been a core element of the action plan. By May 2000, 392 municipal regulations had been eliminated, 203 were eased, and another 3,897 regulations were improved.

To minimize the potential for collusion, the long-standing practice of assigning to one individual jurisdiction over permits, approvals, or inspections within a particular geographic area was abolished. Officials are now assigned on a daily basis to handle applications submitted from different areas.

For a direct and convenient interface with the citizens, the Seoul Municipal Government created an Internet portal. It is called OPEN (Online Procedures ENhancement for Civil Applications), symbolizing that it opens up administrative procedures to the public. The portal explains the various elements of the anticorruption drive, displays an anticorruption index and survey results, educates citizens on rules and procedures, and enables a real-time monitoring of the progress of an application for a permit or license.

A review team composed of staff experienced in audit and inspection was set up on February 1, 1999 to determine which municipal government activities should be made open to the public. The team analyzed the entire array of civil permits and approvals by title, processing procedures, corruption-prone factors, and types of irregularities. The 26 categories of civil applications published on the Web are those that most frequently cause irregularities, cause inconvenience to citizens due to the complexity of the processing procedure, and those whose publication is expected to curb requests for concessions.

Information about required paperwork and how applications are processed are provided on the Web for each procedure. The system also includes information on the city department in charge, staff in-charge, and a telephone number. All application documents provide an e-mail address at the bottom so that people are may easily ask questions or make comments directly to the staff in-charge.
The OPEN system requires that at each review stage the relevant official input the date and time when each application is processed. Free access to the status of an application makes applicants feel no need to contact officials or to provide a bribe to complete the process.

Return postcards are sent to those who have applied for permits or approvals from the municipal government, ensuring some feedback. The results of these surveys form part of a new Anti-Corruption Index” (ACI). Additional channels of direct dialogue have been opened between citizens and the mayor. Examples include hot lines, e-mails, and the "Mayor’s Saturday Date with Citizens" program.

Implementation Challenges

A total of 5,000 employees in 485 city departments dealing with applications were trained in computer rooms to operate the system and add and change the data. Following training, ID's and passwords were assigned to allow each individual trainee to make entries at his or her department.

From July 2000, more government functions will be made public, including 20 more civil affairs functions in areas such as sanitation, welfare, construction, housing, urban planning, and fire fighting.

Benefits and Costs

In the 13 months since the launch of the OPEN system on April 15, 1999, civil applications published by each city department totaled 28,000, and the number of visits to the OPEN site reached 648,000. The general public's interest in the site has been increasing by an average of 1,600 visits a day. Results from a survey of 1,245 citizens showed that 84.3% (984 out of 1,167 persons) believed that OPEN led to greater transparency.

A total of 83 corrupt practices by civil servants were reported by the investigation organizations in 1998. However, not a single case has been filed since February 2000, after the full-fledged anticorruption programs were implemented. A survey of by the Audit & Inspection Division of those seeking services from the city government showed that favorable opinions about the kindness of civil servants increased significantly from 54.8% in December 1998 to 71.2% in June 1999.

Key Lessons

The focus of the anticorruption program was not on IT but on simplification of regulations and procedures, re-engineering of work practices, transparency in procedures, and effective communication with the citizens. Technology simply has been an enabler, particularly in building a transparent tracking system for permit and license applications.

Commitment from the top (in this case, the Mayor) was an important reason for success of the OPEN initiative, as adequate resources were provided for the IT project and there was significant participation from the line management in carrying out systems analysis.
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