E-GOVERNMENT IN KUWAIT: FROM VISION TO REALITY

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Abstract
This paper presents a description of e-government initiatives in Kuwait, where extensive efforts are being made to capitalize on cyber technologies in order to enhance government to citizen services. The described cases are from different ministries and government agencies in Kuwait, where the efforts vary in size and intensity. What appears to be common; however, is the top level support e-government initiatives are receiving, which offers them visibility and hopefully warrants their eventual success. The collective message delivered by the examined cases is that e-government is becoming an integral part of the respective agency’s life with a byproduct being an increase in society’s familiarity and comfort with technology. The dual mission of the Kuwait e-Government Initiative is to ease the lives of its citizens through offering services using the latest IT technology and using this technology to have better intra-government communication. After analyzing the status of e-government in Kuwait, recommendations for future improvements are presented.

1. Introduction

The Information Communication Technology (ICT) age has revolutionized the marketplace, as well as the business-to-consumer and business-to-business relationship. Now, the same force is transforming the model and protocol of interaction in extra-government and intra-government communications. The result of this transformation has been a new relationship in government-to-citizen (G2C), government-to-business (G2B), and most importantly, in government-interagency (G2G) communications that are now Web based. Considering that governments are mainly information producers, rather than information receivers, the Internet presents itself as the ideal intermediary, becoming the 24/365 passive call center for government-citizen interaction. Of course, nothing prevents it from being an interactive call center as well, and this is where the ultimate challenge is.

Governments around the world, and especially in Kuwait, responding to the society’s continuously increasing cyber skills and wanting to capitalize on internet technologies, are funding numerous e-government projects aiming at enhancing their own productivity as well as that of their citizenry and businesses alike. Most projects are Web based, while others are high-tech telecommunications based. Government administrations have recognized that an e-government portal– serving as the gateway to a National Web Depository - can simultaneously meet two important objectives, a national one and an international one. The national objective is operational and dual. On the one hand, it is to serve as a Depository of Documents and a one-stop information center - and on the other, to be a fully interactive service provider with call center capabilities functioning as the

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government’s Transaction Processing System, offering tactical automation. The international objective is strategic and also dual. On one hand, it is to serve as a worldwide showcase, and on the other, as a permanent promoter of that country’s political, cultural and business aims.

Over the past two years, country after country, has initiated programs attempting to Web-enable the government-to-citizen and government–to-business interaction, also making them impersonal. This is significant governance transformation that will only have a positive impact on the path toward a transparent G2C relationship. In the area of education, the information and communication technology has become a cornerstone, and it is identified as the one and only international language. As a result, more and more government agencies are moving employees from the front office to the back office of government service. Ultimately, the front office of government will be the Web, kiosks strategically located in areas of high foot traffic, as well as the SMS capabilities of the present mobile phones.

While in most countries around the globe e-government is treated as a necessary evil, in Kuwait, the e-government vision has been placed at the top of government priorities and with very impressive results; often serving as a G2C interaction showcase. The paper is organized as follows; Section 2 describes Kuwait’s e-government, Section 3 will discuss examples of Kuwait e-government services, Section 4 will discuss the score of Kuwait’s ministries governmental agencies according to the Brown University Evaluation, Section 5 will give recommendations for improvement of e-government in Kuwait, and Section 6 will give a conclusion and final remarks.


The Government of Kuwait has always strived to improve its services. Over the years, ministries and government entities have implemented projects that have improved certain services substantially. That was achieved by automating manual processes in order to decrease the time and effort involved in delivering the service by using the best (IT) equipment available at the time. In the year 2000, a decree was issued by the Cabinet of Ministers forming a Kuwait e-government Committee headed by the Prime Minister. The committee’s task was to develop a vision for e-government projects in Kuwait. Since then, Kuwait has taken big steps towards implementing its e-government projects.

A significant step taken by the government was to sign a memorandum of cooperation with the government of the Republic of Singapore [1], one of the leading countries in the rendering e-government services. The two countries signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) on e-government co-operation. The first MOU was signed on September 15th, 2004, and the second was signed on September 13th, 2005. Under these memoranda the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore developed an “Implementation Blueprint for the Establishment of a New IT Entity” and an “e-Government Blueprint” for the State of Kuwait. The two memoranda will further e-government collaboration to include two areas of co-operation: Singapore will serve as an advisor to Kuwait on information technology and e-government matters, and Kuwait and Singapore will also work together to select suitable private sector suppliers to implement projects identified under the e-government Blueprint.

A study of current websites shows that many of Kuwait's e-government sites are only information providers, not services. On-line service by definition is when a citizen can complete a service
online without the need to go to any government agency. If there is a need for any governmental office interaction or intervention, the service is not considered to be on-line. That includes all components of the service, from filling applications, to making payments. Although Kuwait is very technologically advanced in many areas, such as internet capabilities and the availability and reliability of mobile phone communications, more basic infrastructure is not at the same level of development. One of the problems facing the advancement of these services in Kuwait is the lack of reliable individual home mail delivery. The mail service within the country is at best very slow and inefficient. Daily home to home mail service is not available, most citizens receive their mail in Post Office boxes. Another problem with implementation of e-government in Kuwait is that the majority of Kuwaiti citizens are employed by the government in service delivery tasks. Many of these people would have to be re-trained if services were automated and delivered online. Also, many of the online services delivered presently, lack privacy. In order to begin to solve some of these shortcomings, the present system of Civil Identification cards, which are numbered according to a person’s birth date, and are very easily deciphered, needs to be changed. At present, that very easily deciphered number can be used to obtain all sorts of personal information about an individual. The Singaporean experts recommended the forming of a government agency that would coordinate all e-government endeavors. This agency would report directly to the Prime Minister and Cabinet and it would be their responsibility to oversee the activities of the different agencies. At the present time there is no coordination of all agencies. This entity would fill that gap.

The Global e-Government Readiness Report from 2005, “From e-Government to e-Inclusion” [2], compiled by the United Nations’ Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) showed Kuwait moving up to 75th place in 2005, from 100th place in 2004. The UAE (United Arab Emirates) was in 42nd place in the world in terms of e-government readiness and number one in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) followed by Bahrain, which was at 46th in the Global Report. Similarly, most other Arab countries in the region also showed positive movement in the e-government readiness rankings, with Qatar moving to 62nd from 80th place, and Saudi Arabia moving from 90th place in 2004 to 80th last year. The top 10 countries in the report were the United States, Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Korea, Australia, Singapore, Canada, Finland, and Norway.

3. Examples of e-government Cases in Kuwait:

In this section we describe some e-government sites in Kuwait. These sites are comprised primarily of the different ministries and government agencies involved in rendering services to the public. For each site a brief description is given describing the functionality of the site and its interactivity.

Ministry of Interior (http://www.e.gov.kw): This website was established to help the public (either citizens or expatriates) to get information about matters relating to the Interior Ministry. These matters include services provided by the ministry such as driver’s licenses, passports, traffic violations, expatriates’ residencies and information for women about voting. The site has many services, such as services to make inquiries about traffic violations using the car plate number and the civil ID number. Another service provides expatriates information about their residencies. This is obtained by entering the person’s Civil Identification number. Also available is the ability to check the validity period of official documents such as driver’s licenses, passports, and voter’s registration. This site is only in Arabic at present.
Ministry of Health (http://www.moh.gov.kw): The Ministry of Health site provides information about ministry hospitals and clinics, and emails to contact and to post comments. A choice can be made as to whether to have the site in English or Arabic. The main ministry site has 41 links for hospitals and clinics, most of them give only a brief description and information about what medical services are provided at each hospital or clinic. The site also has a link that can be used to send an email contacting the ministry with any questions, suggestions, or complaints. There is also a link where Health Ministry announcements are posted. This site does not support any other language other than Arabic.

Ministry of Justice (http://www.moj.gov.kw): The site contains general information about the ministry, including information on all the departments and sectors, and a service directory that contains a list of services provided by the ministry. Users can select the required links to obtain information about topics such as the law, required documents, fees, and address and telephone information of the services described on the site. None of these services can be completed online. The Kuwait Court website is still in the development phase. There are no publications that can be accessed, but the site offers two services: users can find out if they are banned from travel by entering their Civil ID number, and they can also view information such as date and time of trials by browsing the database. There are several forms available in PDF format, along with information about the location of the ministry. Users can post comments or suggestions via an online form. A planned service for the site is a feature called “Mahkama Online” (The Court Online). At this time it is uncertain what services will be offered through this feature. There is no foreign language translation for this site.

Ministry of Islamic Affairs (http://islam.gov.kw): This is the official site of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Through this site users can review the different activities of this ministry and stay up to date with its announcements and news. The site provides links to the different departments of this ministry, including the following:

- Al-tanmea al-osariya: This site was created to serve the female users of the site.
- Usersal-seraj almuneer: This site advertises a club that the ministry has for children. Activities and events are described here.
- Media campaigns: The current media campaigns of the ministry are highlighted here. These include television, radio and print campaigns.
- Edarat al-makhtotat: The link provides the user with a way of searching the ministry’s data base.
- Grand Mosque: This site provides a great deal of information about the Grand Mosque, including visitation and tour times.

The Public Authority for Civil Information (http://www.paci.gov.kw): The main task of this agency is to issue a unified identity to all citizens and expatriates, and to establish a unified national bank of civil information. The site consists of many parts. The first gives a brief description of the authority and its main targets. Then there are several electronic services for individuals such as Civil ID renewal, Civil ID status, Civil ID validity. There is also a service that gives all the needed information for modifying residential address, change or correction of name, change of the personal photo, and others. The site mentions all the required documentation, where services can be carried out, and the scheduled fees. In addition, there is a link called Statistics that provides statistical information about the population of Kuwait.

Kuwait Municipality (http://www.baladia.gov.kw): This website provides users with much
information about the municipality, its history, the Municipal Council. The organizational structure of the municipality is posted on the web to be viewed by users. The website also presents a link to a guide of the required documents for getting certificates or permits to practice certain activities or for constructional reasons. Visitors can also get information about the latest building projects along with their locations. In addition, news about the municipality is provided on the website’s main page. Users can also find descriptions of the different governorates and tourist sites in Kuwait. The website allows users to fill in different application forms and send them to the municipality. When the municipality approves or denies the request an e-mail is sent to the requester that informs him/her that the request has been accepted or declined and when it will be ready to be picked up.

Other services provided by this website include the following:
- Searching Kuwait map for a specific establishment or property.
- Finding a route between two points within Kuwait
- Measuring the distance between two points on the Kuwait map.
- Measuring the area of a specific property in Kuwait.
- Exploring the surroundings of a specific point on the map of Kuwait.
- Checking the validation of a specific hygiene certificate
- Checking the validation of a specific advertisement certificate

**Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry** ([http://www.kuwaitchamber.org.kw](http://www.kuwaitchamber.org.kw)): The site offers the public and business people information that is related to economic and commercial issues in Kuwait. The following are features of the site:
- Description of the chamber’s function and Board Members.
- Reference documents are available on topics such as trade, industry, investment, The Kuwait Free-Trade Zone, privatization, bad debt, and labor.
- Online access to titles of brochures published by the chamber.
- Currency rates.
- Calendar of events containing dates of tenders, exhibitions, and training programs.
- An introduction to the Kuwait market and ownership rules, including those pertaining to stocks and the Free-Trade Zone.
- General description of the Kuwait economy, including description of the economic climate in the country as a whole.
- Rules and procedures to become a member of the chamber.
- Trade and commerce information are provided
- Lists of training courses offered by the chamber are given including the ability to register online.

**Civil Service Commission** ([www.csc.net.kw](www.csc.net.kw)): This site mainly targets government employees. In addition, it aids new graduates in seeking employment in the public sector. It also offers publications and information about government organizations, their services, and means to contact them. The basic features of the website are:
- Governmental Services
- National manpower statistics
- Employee Database: a government employee can review their employment file, including work history, salary details, and leave information by entering a Civil ID number and password.
• Vacancies: a listing of available governmental positions classified by the organization, qualifications needed, and gender of candidate.
• Job Application Form
• Providing an email account for each employee in the public sector.

4. Score of Kuwait Ministries and Agencies

In this section, the Brown University Evaluation for e-Government Websites [3] was used to evaluate the above described sites. Four points were awarded to each website for the presence of the following 18 features: publications, databases, audio clips, video clips, foreign language access, not having ads, not having premium fees, not having user fees, disability access, having privacy policies, security policies, allowing digital signatures on transactions, an option to pay via credit cards, email contact information, areas to post comments, option for email updates, option for website personalization, and PDA accessibility.

Features provided a maximum of 72 points for particular websites. Up to 28 points were then awarded, based on the number of online services executable on that site (1 point for one service, two points for two services, three points for three services, and on up to twenty-eight points for twenty-eight or more services). Features were defined as services if the entire transaction could occur online. Searchable databases counted as services only if they involved accessing information that resulted in a specific government service. Services requiring user-fees or payments for access to the services were classified as premium services not accessible to all, and therefore were not included as general public-access services.

According to the Brown University Evaluation, Kuwait’s score was 27.00 in 2005, this gave a rank of 78th in the world, 30.1 in 2004, and was ranked 33rd. This was due to the fact that the criteria for evaluation changes every year and more emphasis is placed on online services. Ministries and agencies that have e-government sites in Kuwait were evaluated using the Brown University method. Totals for each website within a ministry or agency were averaged across all websites to produce a 0 to 100 overall rating for that ministry or agency. The following table shows the score for some of the websites evaluated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Central Bank of Kuwait</td>
<td>35.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ministry of Planning</td>
<td>34.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Civil Service Commission</td>
<td>31.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).</td>
<td>29.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Public Authority Youth and Sport</td>
<td>29.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ministry of Islamic Affairs</td>
<td>27.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kuwait University</td>
<td>26.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kuwait Investment Authority</td>
<td>26.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science</td>
<td>26.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Kuwait Municipality</td>
<td>25.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The Public Authority for Civil Information</td>
<td>24.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ministry of Justice</td>
<td>23.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kuwait Airways</td>
<td>23.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
<td>22.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ministry of Public Works</td>
<td>20.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Legal Advice and Legislation (FATWA)</td>
<td>19.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In researching e-government in Kuwait, the following issues became apparent:

- All e-government sites lack proper provisions for privacy and security of personal information. Anyone having the Civil ID number of a person can access all their personal information.
- Most of the sites do not support any language other than Arabic.
- There is little or no provision for disability access, no provisions are made for those who are visually or otherwise disabled.
- Online payment options are not available.
- There are no provisions for receiving email updates.
- Users do not have the ability to personalize the website.
- None of the sites incorporate premiums or user fees and none of the sites feature ads.

5. Recommendations for Improvement of e-Government in Kuwait

After an examination of the current state of e-government in Kuwait, a list of possible areas of improvement have been formulated. In this section possible suggestions and recommendations will be discussed to improve e-government services in Kuwait.

- Formation of a Public Authority for e-government projects under the umbrella of the Prime Minister’s office. This agency will be responsible for the coordination and supervision of all e-government-related activities. At present, e-government projects are handled by a committee headed by the Minister of Planning, where each government agency works individually. There is lack of coordination and supervision for individual projects. This committee should be dissolved, making the Authority fully responsible for all e-government matters. This authority would not only include a department for implementing and supervising but would also act as a watch group to monitor and audit the progress of e-government projects on a continuous basis. This group could simulate the requesting of services and thus judge the efficiency of the service.

- Prioritize the Improvement of Mail Service. Local mail service in Kuwait is presently very inadequate. This severely hampers the efforts to render services. Currently, some ministries are trying to contract private companies to deliver their products. If this is done, one company should be contracted by the above mentioned authority, to be responsible for all deliveries of e-government related materials (i.e. passports, driver’s licenses, civil I.D) throughout government agencies.

- Payment System Development. A payment system should be developed to allow citizens to pay for services on line. Presently some payments for services from the government are made in two steps. For example, to pay for a land telephone, a bill must be printed from the Ministry of Communications (M.O.C.) website. This is done by entering the phone number and the Civil I.D. of the person whose name is on the phone. The person must then log into his bank account and instruct the bank to pay the M.O.C. the amount needed. This operation takes between three to ten days to be completed because the banks hand deliver
the phone numbers and the amounts to be credited to the MOC. The funds are transferred to the ministry as a lump sum. There is no direct link between the bank and the ministry.

- **SMS:** Mobile phones are widely used by citizens and expatriates. It is estimated that over 90% of people, almost 2 million in Kuwait, have a mobile phone [4] (1.2 million, or 60% of whom use the services of MTC/Vodafone and 0.8 million or 40%, who use Wataniya Telecom). This provides the government with a way to reach the public quickly, directly, and efficiently, through the use of SMS messaging. Many Kuwait e-government projects should concentrate on the use of mobile phones as opposed to internet use. Some Ministries are already using this method. For example, the Ministry of Health uses text messaging to inform the public about vaccination drives. Also, the Ministry of Education uses this method to inform parents when they should register their children for kindergarten.

- **Public Education Campaign.** A public education campaign must be conducted. Currently Kuwaitis lack general knowledge of e-government processes. The campaign needs to include public service programming on radio and television as well as print media coverage. As part of this education, the government should implement incentives for those who use e-government services. In addition to quickness and ease of use, there should be a reduction of fees for those who use e-services. This idea is being successfully implemented by some banks locally. They are charging fees for those who withdraw money using bank tellers, while there are no fees for using the ATMs.

- **Training of Managers.** Government managers, especially those who deliver services to the public, have to be trained in order to give them the capability of automating the procedures in their department. Since there is a scarcity of IT personnel, it is the responsibility of these managers to get their services automated to be able to accomplish tasks in a reasonable time. Studies show that if the automation task is left simply to the IT specialists it would take over twenty years to have services on line.

- **Retraining of Low Level Staff.** Kuwait’s government is the country’s largest employer. Automating e-government services and putting them on-line will cause some of these people their jobs which may create a political problem. The Civil Service Agency, the agency responsible for employment of Kuwaitis, needs to develop programs that will retrain these workers, in order for them to be employable by other ministries or the private sector.

- **Privacy and Security.** Many e-government sites in Kuwait lack privacy and security. The Authority has to implement processes and procedures that will guarantee that people’s private information is not viewed by unauthorized personnel. As an example, recently, the Ministry of Interior posted on their website (www.moi.gov.kw) the list of all Kuwaitis registered to vote in all Kuwait districts. This list contains the voter’s name, Civil I.D. number, employment, birthday, and home address. This list was published in a way that anyone can see it without the need for a user name or password. Part of the Authority’s responsibility is to ensure that privacy is maintained in all government transactions. The latest technological advances need to be used to guarantee that any transfer of information between the citizen and the government is private and secure.
6. Conclusion

The following issues need to be addressed in order to have successful e-government implementation in Kuwait:

- Change Management Thinking. Management must give priority to automation of processes and streamlining of procedures. Consultation with the IT experts will be essential to a successful transition.
- Creation of teams that will manage and guide the way for these new procedures. These processes require the input of the technological experts and the retraining of staff and management to the new ways of doing business.
- Public education and training. These services will be obsolete if they are not used by the general public. A public education and training campaign must be part of the whole formula for success.
- Understanding of the on-going nature of e-government. These websites and services must be continuously updated and revised. The need for constant evaluation and upgrade has to be understood by all those involved.

In closing, in Kuwait, the e-government vision is slowly, but surely, becoming a reality, creating a trilateral win-win-win situation for all: the government, the business sector and the citizen. The government is giving its full support to these endeavors, it is now the responsibility of those involved as well as the general public to be active in the use and upgrade of these services.

References


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