

# Book Review: Enacting e-Government Success: An Integrative Study of Government-wide Website, Organizational Capabilities and Institutions

By J. Ramon Gil-Garcia

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Success has for long played second fiddle in the information systems literature to concepts such as value and technology acceptance. This is a pity. In many circumstances success can be an easier concept to manage and assess than value and it is generally a more meaningful one than mere acceptance. In the Introduction to this book (which is in part based, one assumes, on his PhD dissertation) Ramon Gil-Garcia presents a brief overview of a number of different aspects of e-government that are discussed in the literature including administrative reform, innovation, the desire for better public services and failures. His focus is on the relationship between information technologies and social structures and his mission statement, expressed as two broad questions later refined to six specific research questions, is to try to understand the influence of three factors, different organizational characteristics, institutional arrangements and environmental conditions, on e-government initiatives and *vice versa*, the implication being that there are multiple symbiotic relationships at work. Gil-Garcia wants to understand what these relationships are and what their impact is.

It's an ambitious task, but the author sets about it with gusto. The book proper starts with a wide ranging discussion of what constitutes e-government success and how it can be measured. Gil-Garcia notes the variety of definitions on offer and suggests three approaches to defining e-government. The first is evolutionary and uses the concept of stage models and specifically one of his own devising. This approach just does not work well. He moves on to definitions *qua* definitions which one would think is the logical way to do this. Definitions of e-government abound and, as one cited author remarks, e-government means many different things to many different people. The third approach is based on stakeholders and relationships between government and other entities (G2C, G2B, etc.). Like the stage model approach, this is too odd; it more of a scoping and categorisation exercise than a definitional one. While each of these three discussions is informative, the net result is to leave the reader (who just wants a definition) somewhat confused. It might have been better to simply discuss the scope of e-government and not become bogged down in semantics. Eventually, on page 17, after these various peregrinations, a formal definition (running to over six lines) is proposed. Some elements of this definition too are strange. Since when has e-government been about fostering the knowledge society for example? While there are worse definitions in circulation, a much simpler definition might be that e-government is about the use of ICT by and in government.

Gil-Garcia then turns his attention to success. He first considers success as being mainly measured by outcomes to which one might add "hear, hear". Too many scholars measure e-government success (and value) in the same ways that used to be used to measure dot.com success, i.e. by measuring inputs and/or outputs. Gil-Garcia extends his ideas by looking at technical, political and organizational benefits. Benefits, he argues, arise from success factors including data factors, technology-related factors, organizational factors, institutional factors and contextual factors all of which seems plausible enough. Unfortunately, in the ensuing discussion the concept of benefits and success become to some extent confounded though they are not the same thing. The author notes that to date the e-government literature does not have much to say about success or success factors. It is Gil-Garcia's contention that we need to understand what these success factors are and how they affect e-government in terms of measurable success (or failure). Both these factors and the characteristics of an e-government system feed on each other and understanding the relationships between them matters.

Having laid out the ground, chapter two takes the reader on a panoramic tour of thinking about the relationship between information technology, organisations and social structures. The fact that ICT changes social and organisational structures in a variety of ways has long been known. Several explanatory models and

theories, ranging from structuration theory to social constructivism have been put forward to describe and/or explain this phenomenon. Gil-Garcia draws on several of these for his own proposed model, but the core idea of the enacting e-government success model (if one can call it that) is taken from Fountain's technology enactment framework. Gil-Garcia's model has four major components: *Environmental Conditions, Organizational Processes and Structures, Institutional Arrangements* and *Electronic Government Success*. Three of these have sub components, for example Environmental Conditions is comprised of Political, Social and Economic (but not, curiously, Legal). This model is used to develop six specific research questions the purpose of which is to answer in detail the two broad questions discussed above.

Chapter three describes the execution of the research which Gil-Garcia describes as a "*nested methodology*" though the term "mixed methodology" would be more familiar to many readers. The first step is to operationalise the general model as a specific instance/area of e-government - in this instance government Web portals. In doing this he makes some material simplifications. For example the *Political* component is reduced to *Voting Preferences* and the two sub components of Electronic Government Success (*Enacted Technology* and *Outputs and Outcomes*) are represented by Government-wide web site functionality. While the latter is reasonable, it is not obvious that voting preferences are a good proxy for the political environment. Readers who want to understand this chapter in detail will need a good grasp of statistics in general and of partial least squares (PLS)/structural equation modelling (SEM) in particular. To make sense of this chapter it needs to be read in close conjunction with Appendix 1; in fact it is probably a good idea to read the appendix first before embarking on the chapter. The quantitative analysis is followed up by a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. The interviews deliver depth and, for this reader at least, are much more insightful than the PLS or SEM results. The combination is, however, effective.

As an occasional user of the New York State website whilst I read the chapter on this with some interest, the discussions of this and Indiana websites are not likely to long hold the attention of readers outside of those states, never mind the USA, unless they have a specific reason to read them. For the reader that perseveres there are several insights and useful points in these narratives (including some amusing moments such as the finding that some assessments for NYS programmers tested their knowledge of card programming and COBOL!) Even as far back as 2005 that is a trifle quaint. Gil-Garcia concludes that the NYS site was (as of 2005) a success on the criteria he set out and there is no reason to doubt this. Nor is there reason to doubt that the impact of the three sources of influence on this success, but one cannot help but suspect that there might be other more powerful explanatory variables out there - not least benefits as perceived by citizens and other users. It is not for nothing that for over a decade benchmarking studies have shown that taxation sites were the most effective and widely used e-government service.

In chapter six the factors emerging from this research which lead to e-government success are collected and discussed. Much of this chapter is not going to come as much of a surprise to anybody who is familiar with the ICT management literature, but there are some new findings and ideas. The value of this work lies less in the detail than in the framework

There are curious lacunae in this book. Benchmarking, which is (rightly or wrongly) a widely used proxy measures of success in e-government, is never mentioned as far as one can see (the word does not appear in the index). Whatever one thinks about benchmarking, and it has many critics, it surely deserves some discussion. The vast IS evaluation literature get no airtime either, though Delone and Mclean's success models are briefly discussed. The reliance on quantitative methods is, of course, a very American form of research. Those who have reservations about the ability of these methods to get at reality may wonder about the real meaning of statistically significant relationships between a small number of constructs/factors build on, in some cases, a small number of questions/indicators. For his part, Gil-Garcia argues (p140) that:

*...“this study provides evidence of its usefulness for understanding IT management and institutional influences”.*

This is a bold statement When the "*management strategies and practices*" construct is based on four indicators all of which (as one would expect) relate only to how the agency concerned managed certain services. One senses that interpretivists will not be convinced. The reader can make up his or her own mind.

One of the most important pieces of advice that a supervisor can give his just-completed PhD student is how to get the maximum leverage from his or her research. Assuming that the university does not require students to publish their dissertations in book form (something which is standard practice in many European universities) the choice is between publishing a series of papers in good journals (some may, of course, have been published while doing the PhD) or publishing the result as a book. Some PhDs do both and when they do, the resulting book usually does not work well as a book because trying to build single, cohesive narrative around a series of extant publications is hard. Unless the latter have been carefully organised with an eventual monograph in mind, the end product tends to lack coherence. This is a problem with *Enacting e-Government Success*. It reads too much like a mashup of published work and the author's dissertation to deliver a real theoretical punch. This is a pity because Gil-Garcia does have something worthwhile to say. This is not to say that the book is not worth reading. Gil-Garcia is a fine scholar with an impressive grasp of the literature, of theory and of current thinking about, and concepts in, e-government; there is much here which is well worth the journey. But the books are best written from scratch. Books assembled from published work are useful for dipping into, but not designed for reading cover to cover.

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