

PROCESS INNOVATION IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the degree of innovation of processes in the Romanian local public administration. In a first instance, we have mirrored, on the one hand, the positive connotation unanimously credited to innovation (summarized by the truism “innovation generates progress, economic growth and a better quality of life”) and, on the other hand, the blames of bureaucracy and enclosure traditionally addressed to local public agencies (normally regarded as non-innovator). Starting from this apparent set, we have analyzed the modification the information and communication technologies brought to the 41 city halls which are now present virtually. We have also noticed changes facilitated by the internet and web technologies regarding the payment of taxes and duties, filling in forms, booking services (marriages, public hearings, etc.), the delivery of information, and the relationship with citizens. Finally, according to this information, we have come to several conclusions and recommendations in order to increase process innovation in local administration.

Key words: process innovation, public administration, interaction between public administration and citizens

As we have detailed in Popescu (2011), **the connotation credited to innovation**, both at the organisational and at national or global levels, **is imperatively positive**. In the terms used by Sánchez and Rodríguez (2009, p. 384), „it has become a compulsory reference both in the economic analysis manuals and for the justification of different public policy actions promoting innovation and research, the positive effects on the economic growth and development of companies (income increase, new improved products enhancing the quality of life, a greater sensitivity to these products, etc.) and to the increase of the quality of life.” The authors observe that the Green Paper was the first underlying the social trait of innovation (seen as a mechanism expressing creativity and necessities correlated to the most important current issues and which should mostly allow us improve the living conditions and determined a sustained development) citing Mokyr (1990) for the support of their statements, according to whom innovation increases the total volume of knowledge belonging to society and, implicitly, its productive capacity (quantitative and qualitative) i.e., the economic growth and its capacity to regenerate well-being. Du Plessis (2007) draws the attention on the increasing complexity of innovation seen as a phenomenon which changed the actual nature of economic

growth as well as on the race for novelty which seems to be one of the constant elements of the contemporary economic life. The positive impact of innovation on the economic growth of a nation or region (or on the competitive benefit, the market share or dimensions of the organisation), the complexity and the rhythm of innovation processes are considered by Markatou (2011) to be the reasons why scientific papers and articles belonging to the general business media on this subject are so abundant. Sententiously and truistically, Dumitrachi et.al. (2006, p. 39) states that „innovation is one of the main factors leading to economic well-being”, while Page (2012, EG), bringing into discussion the Solow model, demonstrates even that no economic growth could be possible without innovation. Dayer, Gregersen and Christensen (2011, p. 1) talk about innovation as being the blood flow of global economy, the power which radically change industries and generate well being. A measurable proof of the positive impact of innovation on various levels is brought by a study undertaken by General Electric in 2011 (GE, 2011), where they interviewed 1000 top managers from 12 countries, all of them being involved in innovation, showing, almost unanimously, that innovation is considered to be the hope for a more prosperous and competitive

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economy, more new jobs and for enhancing people's lives, in general.

The above observations usually stand for the private sector and specially refer to product innovation. While discussing about **processes in local public administration**, we can observe a certain ideological stiffness identified by Brătianu (2011, pp. 521-524) as an „innovation killer”, by excessive bureaucracy and are generally seen as **non-innovator**. The author shows that innovation and knowledge creation have been systematically discouraged during the socialist period, and then the only admitted source of knowledge and new ideas was the communist party. As a consequence of the lack of competitiveness in the centralized economic system, the employees were not encouraged to involve in innovator activities. This continues, inertial and residually, even today. In the same study the cited author notices that bureaucracy has achieved clearly negative connotations due to its application without limits during the communist period. Its excessive rules were implemented to support control and the resulting structures, hardened especially in the public administration and still persisting, kill any interest for innovation, change or new knowledge. The inherited hierarchies, where the advantages were directly proportional with the occupied position still generate, even today, corruption and underground rewarding systems, far from meritocracy, and discourage innovation. Adding to all those traits identified above the absence of financing, linear thinking, mechanical patterns based on cause-effect (which discourage innovation, creativity, diversity of opinions), the lack of cooperation between organisations, the lack of spaces for sharing experiences and the insufficient resources (especially human), we can design a less happy picture of the Romanian public administration.

To reconcile the two sets of opposing opinions, we tried to identify the way the traditional processes regarding the interaction of citizens with the city halls have modified as a consequence of their presence in the virtual space, through internet, itself a radical innovation, which substantially changed our lives as well as by Web technologies.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In April 2012, we developed, by means of direct observation, a study for the 41 websites belonging to the city halls (including Bucharest City Hall). The importance of the analyzed websites derive from the fact that they address, directly or indirectly, to approximately 7.872.986 inhabitants of the urban area („indirectly” because the data taken from the

National Statistics Institute website also include children), who represent 37% of the total Romanian population. In this study we wanted to reveal the types of activities traditionally offered by the city hall which have been opened to the public by means of their websites, the form of presenting the information necessary to the public, as well as to identify the means of real-time interaction with citizens, and the level of representation of city halls in Web 2.0. Furthermore, we will present the main findings of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main processes “renewed” by their “movement” into the virtual environment of the city halls are the following:

- Payment transactions of debts to the local public administration;
- Filling in forms;
- Searching for documents (functioning certificates, of taxi companies etc.);
- Booking city hall services (hearings, marriages etc.);
- Information delivery;
- Discussing with citizens.

With reference to the **payment of local taxes and duties**, we have noticed that the payment at the counter is replaced, partially or totally, by the electronic payment. The forms vary from very basic ones (loading the scanned payment document issued by a bank on the website of the city hall) to those which are largely accepted in the business area – card payment or electronic payment. *The main types of virtual payment offices for local taxes and duties* are the following:

1. Joining the Online Banking Payment National System (www.ghiseul.ro). This form is more common in 50% of the analyzed city halls (having to mention that some of them, on the date when the website was accessed, did not show on their website the possibility of payment through ghiseul.ro, the data being collected directly from this website). Some city halls also use their “old” application, which we appreciate as being positive in terms of comfort for the citizen who is already familiar with it;

2. Applications developed by their own resources with different forms – E-clerks with structured menus, which help the user get informed on the activity of the city hall and be able to access links for payments, other applications with varied structures, where the authentication is either performed through the personal numerical code (for citizens) or the registration code (for companies), or with an account and a password requested online or in person, at the counter of the

agency. Applications can be found on 34% of the websites.

In few cases (17%), electronic payment applications either do not exist or are not functional.

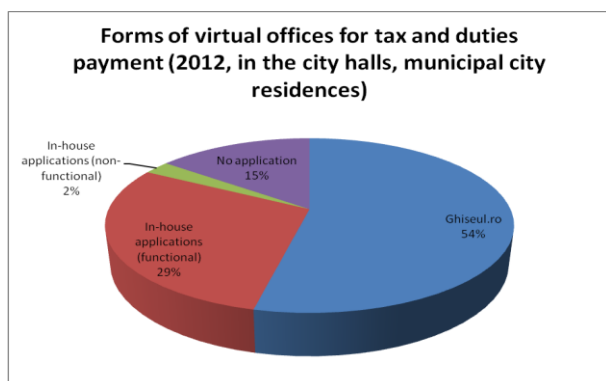


Figure 1 **Forms of virtual offices for tax and duties payment (2012, in the city halls, municipal city residences)**

Downloading scanned forms in PDF or MS Word is very popular on most of the visited websites, with only one exception (Miercurea Ciuc City Hall, www.szereda.ro). The **offered forms** are different from one city hall to another and the role of posting them is to minimise the time lost at the counter – the time is decreased through the simple completion of the form after printing it from the website. We appreciate that this is not the best way, as long as citizens still use their pens to fill in the printed forms, take the document to the city hall or scan it and send it by email, and, obviously, the data will be processed by a clerk into the information system of the city hall.

Online searches for all types of documents (usually for previously filled certificates or requests) are present on at least 30% on the analysed websites and perfectly substitutes, on our opinion, a phone conversation of citizens with the city hall or a visit to the city hall.

The reservations for hearings, marriages, documents etc. are present on at least 21% of websites, and *the online petitions* can be found on approximately 10%.

The great majority of **information is offered** as hypertext, being accessible by means of structured menus differing from one website to the other. The information is varied and sufficient, updated and presented in an attractive manner. A good merit should also be granted to the photo galleries, with representative images of the city. The video information is offered only by 20% of the websites, and one city hall (Târgu Mureș) manages its own YouTube channel. The live broadcasting web cams are to be found on

approximately 30% of the websites, digital interactive maps on 70% of the analysed websites.

Forms of virtual interaction with citizens on the analysed websites are:

- Forums, in 34% of cases. Unfortunately, not all forums are well maintained and part of them are not updated (in the sense that citizens didn't not receive answers to their questions from the official representatives but from ... other citizens) and the spam are many;
- Suggestions and complaints pages which can be filled online;
- Messaging, either directly to the site or by email (all websites offer an email address at contact, in the diagram in figure 2 the area „Email messages” refers to those websites having this modality as the only method of interaction);
- Connexion to www.domnuleprimar.ro, website, which is a place for dialogue with the mayors of any registered city hall.

The scales we calculated for the above types of interaction of citizens with the mayors are visible in figure 2.

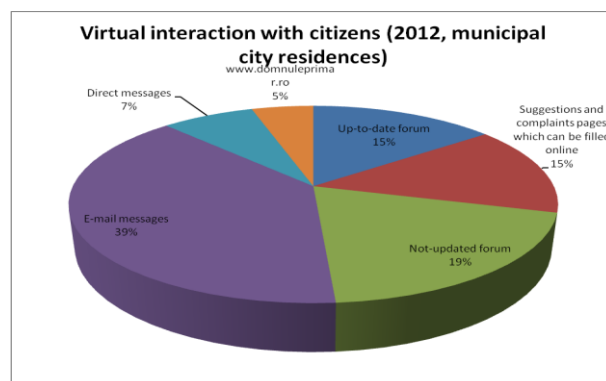


Figure 2 **Virtual interaction with citizens (2012, municipal city residences)**

Analysing the website of several city halls we have noticed they actually lack on **Web 2.0 specific social networks** (like Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, blogs etc.) – which is also visible in figure 3.

Taking for example Facebook, one of the most popular social networking platforms and analysing the pages of those city halls present on this environment (identified as “X city hall” or “The city Hall of municipal X”, not to create confusions with the pages of cities), we obtained data partially confirming the observations on the websites of the city halls, in the sense that the official Facebook pages are appreciated whenever some clerk has a job task to update it. The rest of pages were either automatically created, as a consequence of an employment post from the employees, Facebook users, and received random

likes (having no content) or as individual pages, inaccessible without the prior consent of the owner or without being updates and far from being an official page of a public agency, from our opinion.

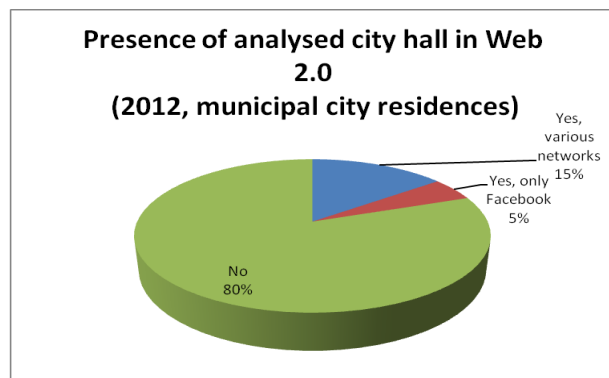


Figure 3 Presence of analysed city hall in Web 2.0 (2012, municipal city residences)

Table 1
Discrepancy between the number of inhabitants served and the number of 'likes' received online by the city halls on Facebook

City Hall	Inhabitants	Likes	Percentage*
Oradea	204880	1431	0.70%
Deva	76765	541	0.70%
Reșița	94580	446	0.47%
Râmnicu Vâlcea	118539	216	0.18%
București	1944451	100	0.01%
Bacău	175867	74	0.04%
Bistrița	84630	55	0.06%
Constanța	301951	55	0.02%
Alba Iulia	68450	46	0.07%
Pitești	167017	35	0.02%

*the percentage of inhabitants pressing the 'Like' button on the Facebook page of the city hall

There is a huge discrepancy between the number of inhabitants served by the city halls and the number of "Likes" on the Facebook page of the city hall (see Table 1, where we showed the information on pages with at least 10 "Likes") which is relevant. In our opinion, public administration agencies should consider the openness towards the citizens also in these environments, currently more and more popular, and extremely visited especially by younger users.

The web pages belonging to the analyzed city halls have also shown other services offered to users – such as survey questionnaires, blogs, online media (adaptable to mobile devices, in Timisoara), virtual tours, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the observations gathered from the website of the 41 city halls, we have the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. *We can talk about innovation within the interaction with citizens due to the movement of*

city halls towards the virtual environment. Innovation is incremental, in our opinion, in the sense that it does not decisively, radically modify the activity of city halls, but enhances citizens' comfort enabling them to undertake several activities from home, with a minimum time due to the internet;

2. *Some city halls are more innovative than others.* Our intuition is, as in the Romanian saying "a good farmer makes a good farm", the difference lies between the human qualities of the employees of the city hall. In order to improve the innovation capacity of the agency, the city hall leadership shall cultivate associative thinking, permanent interaction with people, things, information, unprejudiced observation of the surrounding world, asking questions and finding answers destroying patterns, the "local optima" in problem solving – together, these traits form what Dayer, Gregersen and Christensen (2011) call the innovator's DNA. In order to achieve this, the city wall working environment should be relaxed, allowing the employees to be curious and open to novelty. The calculated chaos is a good solution – creative ideas come to the light when people are encouraged to think differently, to have a different approach and make changes;

3. *The city halls seem not to collaborate and share new means of interaction with citizens.* The possible explanation probably lies in the non-competitive environment where they function. Although there have been some very interesting initiatives (online media adapted for mobile devices, their own YouTube channel, etc.), they are completely isolated. The unanimously adopted solutions are simple and ineffective, such as scanning the documents and upload them as PDF – although a cheap and simple alternative, such as loading MS Word documents followed by the export of the data filled in towards a database, fails to be used. Innovation and using new technologies do not depend only on individual factors but also on the interaction and synergy of various factors while innovator activities require an innovator environment needing to mutually share staff, scientific and technological knowledge specialized services and innovator stimuli. Both organisationally and nationally, a co-operative and collaborative culture is an absolute must for the transfer of knowledge between individuals and groups. Without the right mechanisms encouraging cooperation, the structured or technological interventions of knowledge transfer may be not functional;

4. *The city halls are not visible enough on Web 2.0.* We recommend that the environments of this type shall not be ignored (according to the

newest estimations, Facebook includes over 7,5 millions Romanians!). In Web 2.0, the environment itself may remodel and renew the message, making it attractive in form for a certain target audience never addressed before.

The success and progress recipe to improve the relationship with citizens by means of websites include, we believe, a correct financing, a sustained, coherent and steadfast management of innovation, partnerships with other similar agencies and with the public sector. The constant intensification of these parameters may lead to the transformation of city halls from isolated island to network hubs of free transferable knowledge generating, by division, innovations supporting the public sector.

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