

The never-ending project : understanding e-government project escalation

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Valorisation

On the day that I write this paragraph, news has come out that the Dutch Minister of Defence has terminated an e-government project with little result, after it had run for 11 years and consumed almost 1 billion Euros (estimates by the Dutch General Chamber of Auditors).

Escalation of projects aimed at implementing IT in the public sector has been a headache to the policy practice for almost three decades, not only in the Netherlands, but also in many other countries, including the United States of America, the United Kingdom and South Korea. In fact, over the course of this study, a parliamentary committee in the Netherlands conducted a research on the on-going problems with the effectiveness of e-government projects and wastage of public resources involved. I was asked to inform this committee based on my research and many of the findings of this study were included in the committee's final report.

Sometimes governments have to undertake risky initiatives with taxpayer's money, such as e-government projects. This study articulates that the specific context of e-government projects make them unlikely to go from A to B in a straight line. Many things can and will go wrong. There are however practices available regarding the governance and management of such initiatives that significantly reduce the likelihood that things going wrong will also result in massive wastage of public resources. Such practices have been proposed by this study.

Besides implementing proposed practices for the governance and management of e-government projects, this study calls for a cultural change. As articulated in chapter 4, the current political values in the Netherlands favour commitment over re-direction or termination in

case of failing e-government projects. It seems that the Dutch government has developed a mantra of infallibility. Since no organisation is of course in absence of error, this mantra only results in hiding or denying failures. This effect is strengthened by an eagerness of the public to find scapegoats when failure in government is exposed. Unless a culture is grown in which we value those who acknowledge failure, taxpayer's money will continue to be used irresponsibly in the development of e-government and in many other contexts.