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Access to Public Sector Information (PSI)

A survey of 17 central government Portals in Europe, USA and Canada



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1. Introduction

Promotion of e-government is one of the three main objectives of E-Europe 2005 in addition to facilitating access to the Internet (especially broadband interconnectivity) and fostering the development of a dynamic and competitive business environment in Europe. According to the eEurope 2005 Action Plan, European governments should have modern on-line public services that are interactive, accessible to all and offered on multiple platforms by 2005. While e-Europe focuses on increasing connectivity, it also emphasises improving and building knowledge, facilitating the exchange of experience, good practice and demonstration projects, as well as in learning lessons from failures. It is in this area in which governments can and will play a major role, in particular in providing *public sector information (PSI)*.

- The evolution of the information society and the emergence of e-government in recent years has provided new avenues through which governments can support business development in their countries, in this case through the provision of information and services aimed at enterprises. Within this context, one of the most important functions of e-government is in providing access to *public sector information (PSI)* that is necessary, useful and relevant to citizens and businesses, thus contributing to the competitiveness of a country's enterprises. Access to information and knowledge can provide added value for firms, since competitiveness is more likely to be achieved by companies that are better informed about market conditions in domestic and foreign markets and are aware of the laws and regulations affecting the business environment. Public sector information can carry substantial economic weight, particularly if it is of high quality, reliability, and relevance to firms. Thus PSI can contribute directly to the development of the knowledge economy.

Recognising the importance of PSI for Europe's enterprises, the European Commission has undertaken a number of policies to promote a certain level of harmonisation of central government portals and their contents. One of the leading Commission e-government programmes is *IDA (Interchange of Data between Administrations)*, which is operated by DG-Enterprise (thus also suggesting enhanced attention to business implications of such PSI provided by participating governments). IDA concentrates on the interchange of data, providing the technical framework for the networking and data exchange of public administrations (on the supply side), and in particular in extending the benefits of transEuropean networks to EU businesses and citizens. Another important effort concentrating on the commercial use of public sector information throughout the EU is *eContent* (on the demand side). The eContent programme links together the public and private actors of different Member States (or other states participating in the programme) involved in the development of new applications by re-using public sector information.

Since such an approach involves a high level of co-ordination between different states with different legal approaches, certain harmonised rules governing this area at the Community level are indispensable in order to ensure the sound functioning of the internal market, which already is very heterogeneous and diverse and will become even more diverse with the accession of new member states. This is undoubtedly also one of the main reasons for the regulatory initiative of the Commission to provide some harmonisation rules in this field which should be manifested in the *Directive on Re-use of Public Sector Information*, now in the process of adoption.

The emergence of e-government during the 1990s has exponentially improved access to information about government structure, functions, policies, laws and new developments in a manner that is accessible to ordinary citizens and businesses without special training, education or background. While e-government itself is a recent phenomenon, it has evolved substantially, particularly since 2000-2001, to become more user oriented. The initial experiences and citizen and business feedback have led many countries to redesign and simplify their official portals to make e-government more "user-friendly" and more oriented toward the real needs of citizens and businesses, rather than incorporating sophisticated applications that often serve to complicate rather than facilitate relationships with the government.



According to a recent OECD Policy Brief,¹ “e-government is more about government than about “e” and should be beneficial to public administrations and society at large by:

- Improving efficiency
- Improving services
- Helping achieve specific policy outcomes
- Contributing to broad policy objectives
- Contributing to reform, and
- Building trust between governments and citizens.

On-line services for business

Links between governments and businesses take on various forms. At a very basic level there are company registration, payment of taxes and employee contributions, and various regulations that companies must follow. Businesses can also provide products and services to governments. With the development of e-government, the means of conducting these relationships have been translated into electronic transactions which allow companies to complete required procedures and applications from their own offices. Particularly for recurring transactions (such as reporting of employee social contributions, VAT and tax declarations), these electronic services can save the businesses both time and money and can help streamline administrative procedures. In recent years many European governments at different levels of territorial authority have set up web sites and developed electronic services for tax declarations, building permit applications, permits for the undertaking of specific business activities and other procedures.

Member States have agreed to a common list of public services, 12 for citizens and 8 for businesses, that are to be provided via Internet. These services are currently being put online at the relevant administrative levels of public service. The 8 public services for business are the following:

- Social contributions for employees
- Corporation tax: declaration and notification
- VAT: declaration and notification
- Registration of a new company
- Submission of data to statistical offices
- Customs declarations
- Environment-related permits (incl reporting)
- Public procurement

Beginning in the early to mid-1990s most national governments have set up central portals, mainly to provide information; though the type and quality of information available tends to vary significantly. At a minimum, access is provided to relevant legal documents, especially regulations and statutes, as well as other useful information on the administrative or legal requirements of engaging in business or regarding business obligations to government (taxes, registration, employee, social and environmental issues, consumer protection, etc.). Access to this “obligatory” information tends to be free of charge. Some governments, however, have gone beyond providing such regulatory and administrative information online by placing higher value added materials on the Internet which can help businesses in marketing, distribution and sales, and in developing businesses plans and strategies (in particular the Canadian government portal). Some of the information may be in the form of country or market studies that are particularly useful for exporters or investors. Such PSI can help save money, especially for SMEs which may not have significant resources to spend on market research. While some governments generally provide the information and documents free of charge (the US government in particular; also the German government), others prefer to charge a sometimes nominal fee (for example ICE, the foreign trade promotion office of the Italian Government) or try to limit access to domestic companies (Canadian government).

¹ OECD Observer, March 2003, “*The e-government imperative: main findings*”



Since 2000-2001, many government portals and their associated pages and links were upgraded to provide not only access to information and documents, but also various levels of services for citizens and businesses (some even involving transactions that take place completely on-line). These revisions and upgrades were motivated by the governments' desire to make the portals and e-services more "user oriented." Putting the user at the centre has involved a simplification of access, rationalisation of structure, organisation by themes or life events, and elimination of complicated and sometimes confusing access paths. The most effective e-government portals are not necessarily those that incorporate the most sophisticated functions and most advanced applications, but those that best serve the needs of citizens and businesses and that are easily accessible, allowing users to quickly find the desired information and services that are needed.

Among the most important considerations for users of e-government portals are:

- 1) availability
- 2) quality and reliability of information
- 3) integration of services and information

Two particular Challenges for Government portals :

Availability: e-Government providers need to ensure user-friendly access to the relevant portal.

Today, web-based services represent additional options to traditional service channels. In the future, the development of digital technologies and applications could lead to a situation in which electronic services are no longer used only by a technological minority but to a situation in which they become the only service available. One such example is the INPS social services contributions declaration in Italy. INPS is trying to encourage all businesses to make declarations of employee social contributions (DM-10) online—which saves time, effort and money both for the firm and the government agency.

Reliability: Public sector information cannot be easily and reliably validated by users. Users do not always know whether they are viewing an official and latest version of the document. This problem is amplified if the document is obtained via a portal that does not belong to the document issuer. There is thus a certain risk in setting up links that provide access to sites and documents over which the original e-government provider has no control. In general, the greater the value portals provide to citizens and enterprises, the more critical an issue the reliability of the accessed links becomes. This problem doesn't go away by publishing disclaimers. In fact, any value producing governmental entity needs to be defined in terms of responsibility and accountability. Government portals have a certain obligation to ensure reliability of content for citizens and other users, otherwise their value is questionable and the authoritativeness of the information in the site is seriously undermined. It is, in fact, an important challenge for governments to vouch for the quality, reliability, completeness and currentness of the information.

The stated objective of many of the public entities that have established e-governments is to move toward multichannel digital delivery of public services and information. Multichannel delivery at present includes the traditional modes through administrative offices with person-to-person contact, post, telephone and fax. This was expanded over the past decade to include Internet and e-mail. The newer applications include wireless services and information that are transmitted via cellular phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs), yet only a few governments, such as Canada's, have adopted them to date. Government information can also be made available on television teletexts, a function that is used in Italy as well as other countries to publish train schedules, weather information, government press releases and information on public service strikes.

Thus, the trend in e-government appears to be moving toward adoption of more user-oriented approaches of providing public sector information and services on a 24/7 basis and via different channels, implying an eventual shift from e-government to m-government in which "m" signifies both



“mobility” and “multiplicity.”² Internet is one of the main avenues today, but other digital technologies will become more prevalent as the number and variety of delivery vehicles and their dedicated users grow. In the future, business people should be able to gain information about country X, register a business, declare taxes and fill in a VAT application through a variety of means, wherever and whenever the mood strikes, without necessarily being connected to a fixed infrastructure.

Moving toward 24/7 multichannel public services: “Whenever, Wherever”

- traditional modes will still be available
- new technologies, particularly those providing “mobile access”, will experience greater use
- national and regional differences will remain in uptake of these services
- constraining factors from both user side (demand for mobile services, use of suitable devices) and supply side (supply of mobile and alternative access services offered by governments)
- governments for the most part are still working on putting services “on-line”
- questions about reliability, security and connectivity
- emerging modes of access: mobile phone, PDA, satellite television, wireless Internet access, etc.

2. Methodology

For this particular exercise, we have undertaken a web-based survey of selected central government portals and evaluated the way they are set up from a small business and citizens’ perspective. The object of the exercise is not to engage in any benchmarking or ranking, but essentially to provide an overview of the different central government portals from a typical user (small enterprise) perspective. The focus is on the approach used by the different governments in providing its PSI to citizens and businesses.

At a very basic level, an ideal national e-government portal should provide:

- access to various ministries
- access to regulations and other relevant documentation
- information that is up-to-date and reliable
- applications and forms on-line
- relevant information and other added value resources
- integration of national and subnational levels

In this survey we have examined the portals of the following Member States: Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. The government portals of Estonia, Hungary, Slovenia and Poland were also examined, but in a more superficial way. Outside of Europe we also surveyed the central portals of the United States and Canada, as these are often sited as best practice examples. The focus was conducted more in-depth on portals for which the researchers could understand the languages (German, French, Italian, Spanish, Slovene and Polish, and to a limited extent, Dutch and Swedish), given that there was often very little material in English in the sites.

² Santucci, G., May 2002, “A broad vision for the future of e-Government”, speech delivered at the Conference “Internet Portals and the Re-engineering of Local and Regional Governments in Europe,” in Catania, Italy, posted on IDA website.



Table 2.1 Languages used in Selected e-Government Portals

Country/ portal	Main language(s)	Other language(s)	comments
Austria www.help.gov	German	English (with Czech, Hungarian, Slovak to be included in the future)	Increasing number of foreign language pages
Belgium www.belgium.be	Dutch/French	German (also an official language), English	Different information in different official languages
France www.service-public.fr	French	English, German, Spanish	Significant number of pages in foreign languages
Finland www.suomi.fi	Finland/Swedish	English	Only selected pages for immigrants
Germany www.bund.de	German	English	Increasing number of pages
Ireland www.irlgov.ie	English/Gaelic	German, French, Italian Spanish	English and Gaelic content not completely identical
Italy www.italia.gov.it	Italian	English German	INPS information also in German (official language in one province)
Spain www.administracion.es	Spanish	Catalonian, Galician, Basque, Valencian, English, French	English and French only for international portal
Sweden www.sverigedirect.gov.se	Swedish	English, Spanish, French, Finnish, Bosnian, Serb, Arab and Persian	only the description about the content in other languages, without links
Slovenia www.gov.si	Slovene	English	Completely bilingual website
UK www.ukonline.gov.uk	English	Welsh (Cymraeg)	Many Welsh language pages, but site is not completely bilingual.
Outside Europe			
Canada www.canada.gc.ca	English/French		Completely bilingual website
USA www.FirstGov.gov	English	Spanish	Growing effort to increase Spanish-language content



Language and Access

Language is a critical factor in providing access to information. The language of a site can provide or deny access, depending on the linguistic comprehension of the user. Language is associated with national and ethnic identity and in many countries the use of certain languages may also have political connotations (note, for example, the use of Gaelic in Ireland, the linguistic divisions of Belgium and Canada, and the languages spoken in Spain's Autonomous Communities).

Language can contribute to social inclusion as well as exclusion as seen, for example, in the fact that many governments provide information in English (which is aimed at foreign visitors to the site, in particular foreign investors or researchers, but does not necessarily help minorities who don't have a good understanding of either that country's language or of English). In fact, while governments do have a responsibility to their citizens to provide PSI that is indeed accessible to different types of people, there is some discussion as to how far such alternative language PSI on e-government sites should go, since adding different language material implies additional costs and can also send out particular political messages.

Governments also publish PSI on the Internet for the benefit of outside audiences: other governments, international organisations and individuals, including researchers and analysts, students, and prospective tourists, foreign investors, or business people. Thus, providing access to PSI in different languages can also create significant economic value, particularly where investment, trade and tourism are concerned. To date, English—as the main language of the Internet—remains the principal additional foreign language in European e-government portals.

In conducting the survey, we have examined three main aspects of the portals: access, structure and content, taking into account the characteristics and considerations as outlined in Table 2.2 below. From the small business user perspective, some of the main concerns include ease of understanding, whether the relevant pages are immediately available from the portal or whether navigation (and how much navigation) is required. Of primary interest is whether there are particular gateways aimed at businesses.

The survey should not be misconstrued as being scientific, since the findings are qualitative and highly subjective. Still, it has some usefulness in providing an overview of the approaches of different countries in setting up their portals that provide information and services for citizens and businesses.

Table 2.2 Portal Survey Grid

	Access	Structure	Content
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed of access • Ease of navigation • Languages • Images/graphics • Audio/video • Access from search engines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gateways by user categories • Life/business events • Themes • Physical organisation (trptych, etc.) • Links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official documents • Information • Online/interactive • Transactions • Resources • Forms • Press releases • News • Feedback
Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different paths of access • Multichannel availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National links • Regional links • Local links • EU links • Links to private sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability • Quality • Quantity • Added value



The survey has applied a horizontal approach, covering a large number of countries from a “top-down” perspective. This means that the central government portals were examined starting from the “single access point” rather than at the local level, without navigating to any great depth within the individual sites. This permits a certain standardisation of approach, since it allows covering a wide range of portals and it is difficult to access the local or regional levels of e-government without knowing the local and regional bodies that provide business services in all of the different countries. Furthermore, the analysis was initiated from the perspective of a potential small business operator, who perhaps has limited knowledge about starting a business, where to find information, and what the laws and requirements may be in his/her country. To female or minority business persons, information on financing and special support programmes will be of special interest—some countries have particularly strong programmes in providing assistance for non-typical business persons, and providing relevant PSI to non-traditional segments of the population can help support the objective of social inclusion.

In order to get a closer understanding of the nature of different countries' information and services for businesses, we also applied the “bottom-up” approach to two countries, one Member State (Italy) and one extra-European country (Canada, which is generally cited as one of the best practice examples in the field of e-Government). This approach was undertaken by reversing the access process from the local/regional level to investigate how a company might accede to the national portal starting from the lower levels of e-government. This exercise was also performed in order to investigate the possibility of multiple access paths.

Thus we return to the above grid, which provides a framework for asking the most important questions regarding the e-government information and services for businesses:

- *Access*: whether or not it is easy to get into the relevant webpages with very few clicks and without requiring sophisticated software or upgrades. Language is also an important factor of access, as is whether or not a user must register.
- *Structure*: is also closely linked to access, since this is what guides the user to different web pages. Gateways dedicated to different user groups are particularly important in channelling the users to the desired sites. Many of the successful e-government sites provide separate gateways dedicated to citizens and to businesses. In this sense, links are important in guiding users to other information or websites that are of relevance. Physical structure and graphics play a strong role in affecting the user-friendliness of a portal.
- *Content*: is the actual information and services provided in the e-government site, which due to their location are deemed as “official”. Content is quite variable and ranges from statistics, government regulations and documents, news and press releases, commissioned studies and reports, to forms and online services as well as interactive applications in some cases.

These three elements play important roles not just in the usefulness, but also in the effective use of the PSI provided. While it is the content that provides the true value added to a portal, if users have difficulty accessing it or navigating the sites therein, then its use and thus its usefulness are significantly diminished.

3. Survey of e-Government Portals

In surveying the different e-government portals and their associated websites, we used the scheme shown in Table 3.1 below as a framework for understanding the structure and content within them.



Table 3. 1 Characteristics of Structure of selected e-government portals

Country	Portal	Access to Ministries	Thematic / Life event organisation	Gateway/ immediate access to business	Regulations/ legal documents	Applications and forms	Information & other resources/ (value added)	Links to sub-national govt. levels
Austria	http://www.help.gv.at	XX	Yes	Yes	X	X	X or XX	XX
Belgium	www.belgium.be	X	No	Yes	XX	XX	XXX	X
Finland	www.suomi.fi	XX	Yes	No	XXX	Outside portal	XXX	XXXX
France	www.service-public.fr	XX	Yes	Yes	X	XX	X	XX
Germany	www.bund.de	XXX	Yes	No	XX	X	XX	X (all levels)
Ireland	www.irlgov.gov.it	X	No	Yes	XXX	XX	XX	???N/A
Italy	www.italia.gov.it	X	Yes	No	XX	XX	X	X regions XX prov.
NL	www.overheid.nl	XXX	Yes	No	XX via search function	XXX	XXX	X (down to local level)
Sweden	www.sverigedirect.gov.se	X	Yes	No	X	XX	X	X
UK	www.ukonline.gov.uk	X	Yes	Yes	XX	XX	X	X
Canada	www.canada.gc.ca	X	Yes	Yes	XX	XX	XX	X
USA	www.FirstGov.gov	X alpha-betical	Yes	Yes	XX	XX	XX	X

X = number of clicks required to access information

Table 3.1 represents a quick overview of the various government portals, focusing on the general organisation and accessibility of information and services that could be of interest to businesses. For two features, a simple yes or no indicates whether or not the portal contains a dedicated gateway for businesses or is organised via thematic or life events. These features greatly contribute to ease of access for users. For the other features, the number of clicks needed to arrive at the headings for the topics is indicated. The more clicks required, the longer the navigation path—though this does not



necessarily mean that the path is more complicated. Again, it should be emphasised that the portals were approached from the perspective of a non-expert business person, who is not necessarily familiar with the organisation of the government and the location of the offices which provide information and services relevant to that individual's needs.

Table 3.2, below, in addition to listing the central government portals, identifies other relevant portals as well as specific online services for business that could be easily found. Several portals (i.e. those of the Anglophone countries the UK, Ireland, the US and Canada) offer a large number of services online, while for Finland and the Netherlands it was difficult to locate them within the portal—though this might have been due simply to difficulties in understanding the language used in identifying the access links.

Table 3.2 Selected Countries and their Government Portals

Country	General Government Portal	Portal containing business information / services	Specific services	Comments
Austria	http://www.help.gv.at www.austria.gv.at	www.bmf.gv.at www.finanz.online.bmf.gv.at	Local online business services, FINANZOnline, taxes, business registration, online payment "bezahlen.at"	Organised in gateways or according to life and business events.
Belgium	www.gov.be www.belgium.be	www.mineco.fgov.be www.simplification.fgov.be www.invest.belgium.be	Dimona: Social contributions DMFA Registering new company	New business oriented gateway that is being expanded
Finland	www.suomi.fi	www.efinland.fi/eGovernment www.yrityssuomi.fi www.vm.fi/vm www.finpro.fi	Tax declaration, but in other portal	Organised by themes, but must go to another portal YritysSuomi for business-related information
France	www.service-public.fr	www.minefi.gouv.fr www.net-entreprise.fr www.internet.gouv.fr www.competitivite-numerique.com/	Tax declaration, public procurement	Subportals on financial and fiscal matters and social issues
Germany	www.bund.de	www.bmw.de www.staat-modern.de www.invest-in-germany.de www.elster.de	ELSTER online revenue and tax declarations, e-payment	Thematically organised. Linked to text and explanations in English. Direct links from portal. Acts as a catalogue of government information.
Ireland	www.irlgov.ie	www.reach.ie www.basis.ie www.oasis.ie	Revenue online service, FAS online, company registration, land registry, IMB medical devices online registration, redundancy calculator, duplicate certificate	Ireland has multiple sites, some with overlapping focus
Italy	www.italia.gov.it	www.confindustria.it www.unioncamere.it www.sviluppoitalia.it	Tax declaration, VAT declaration, Customs declaration,	There are also many private portals containing information



		www.minindustria.it www.veneto-pmi.it	Motor vehicle registration, New company registration, building permits, one-stop-shops, employee social contributions	for business
Netherlands	www.overheid.nl www.regiering.nl www.nederland.nl www.dutchgovernment.nl	www.minez.nl	Tax declaration Customs declaration	Set up 1999; Upgraded in Jan 2001. Very practical, easy to understand, appealing graphics, but have to navigate to find specific information.
Spain	www.administracion.es	www.map.es www.aeat.es	Tax declaration, VAT declaration	Ministry of Public Administration and Tax agency
Sweden	www.sverigedirect.gov.se www.sweden.se	www.statskontoret.se www.regeringen.se www.industry.ministry.se	Patent registration, public procurement, tax declaration	Enterprise relevant information in the Ministry of Industry
United Kingdom	www.ukonline.gov.uk	www.gateway.gov.uk www.dti.gov.uk	Tax declaration, Customs declaration, VAT, Social contributions, company registration	Ukonline for business in partnership between government and industry
Outside EU				
Canada	www.canada.gc.ca	www.businessgateway.gc.ca www.gol-ged.gc.ca	Record of employment, export declaration, intellectual property, Trade & investment feedback, interactive business tools, finance search	Seen as model for many other e-governments. Mobile wireless service introduced
USA	www.FirstGov.gov	www.business.gov www.womenbiz.gov www.pro-net.sba.gov www.sba.gov www.businesslaw.gov	Taxes, buy from government, Job Bank for employers, trademarks & patents, shareware for bus. applications	Linked to tremendous number of sites and information, but not always easy to navigate

The following are survey results of top-down overviews of the e-government portals of selected countries.

3.1. EU Countries

3.1.1. Austria

Since 1997 the Austrian central government's Internet presence has evolved from essentially an Internet-based information platform to a broad-based service platform for citizens and businesses. The central government portal, HELP <http://www.help.gv.at>, was an initiative of the Federal Chancellery, supported by the Federal Data Processing Centre. HELP's objective is to function as a virtual guide to authorities and provide information as well as relevant administrative forms (some forms still have to be printed out, while others provide on-line transactions). The goal of the Austrian government is to



electronically process all official procedures by 2005. By March 2003, 90 local official proceedings were offered on-line and there has been a dramatic increase in user access from less than 20,000 in early 1999 to over 220,000 in early 2003.

HELP online electronically links the information and services of 12 federal ministries and nine provinces, as well as local governments. The Austrian government spent more than EUR 1.2 million for only part of HELP. The portal uses open standards to support its PKI (Public Key Infrastructure).

As seen recently in other e-governments, the HELP site lets the user gain access to information and services quickly and efficiently rather than forcing citizens and businesses to navigate through various sites (not always knowing the organisation of the public administration). The site is organised according to life or business situations in alphabetical order and provides forms for printing or downloading. In fact, this is a major time saver, as citizens may not be interested in or have time to understand which authorities handle which services. On the other hand, to find specific ministries, a user must make several clicks.

HELP adopts the *one-stop principle*: from the central website it is possible to begin official procedures with the involved local authorities (however, at present only a few local authorities offer online transactions and only a limited number of transactions are available). From the central portal, applications are forwarded to the relevant authorities. The portal also contains functions for citizen feedback and an on-line questionnaire.

A special feature is organisation to help certain interest groups gain quicker access to information, for example gateways for Businesses, People with Disabilities and Foreign Citizens. This also reflects the government's concern with ensuring social inclusion for different types of people who live in Austria:

- There is a whole series of webpages and links dedicated to business, providing access to information, advice and services that can help entrepreneurs in starting a business or engaging in activities such as export and investment. "HELP for Entrepreneurs" was launched in January 2001, comprising 50 life situations (business situations). An interesting feature is HELP-Advertising, in which businesses can present advertisements (banners, etc.) in the website aimed at specific target groups or life situations (i.e. families with newborns could be targeted for childcare products).
- With regard to foreigners living in Austria, the most important official proceedings are provided in English as is information on setting up a business in Austria (from the tone of the website it seemed that this information was mainly aimed at SMEs rather than large or multinational firms). Website pages are being expanded to also include Hungarian, Czech and Slovak languages, given the large numbers of citizens from neighbouring countries who live and work in Austria. There are also numerous links to the EU portal.
- HELP also provides multichannel access to forms and procedures for citizens without Internet: forms can be printed in tobacconists shops for a small fee. Also there is a HELPLine telephone service.

3.1.2. Belgium

Belgium's federal government portal www.belgium.be has gateways for citizens, businesses and civil servants. Its webpages are available in Belgium's two main languages, French and Dutch. Information is also provided in German (the third official language), as well as English. At present not all pages are available in all languages and in some cases access jumps from one language to another. The Federal structure and the distinct linguistic divisions have imposed certain challenges in the setting up of e-government in Belgium. While linguistic parity (for the two main languages) may be an objective, this does not yet appear to have been fully established.

The idea behind the Belgian e-government was to change the provision of public administration services in four aspects: to make it quicker (no need to move from home or office, feedback in real time), more convenient (24/7 access from work or home, constant access to information that is easier to find, service more personalised), requiring less interaction (personal data are requested only once, given that data can be exchanged between administrations), and more transparent (citizens and businesses have



more input in decisions, more contact with public officials.) The *Dimona* system for social contributions is often cited as a best practice example.

The business portal of the Belgian Federal Authorities was set up recently in a process that is still ongoing. A series of electronic transactions is to be introduced and is supposed to be accessible to users as of July 2003. At present the site provides access to information on business start-up procedures, support measures and public tenders as well as a business calendar.

3.1.3. Finland

Finland has established a new portal <http://www.suomi.fi> for its public sector services and related information. The main services and information are grouped by subject area, thus there is a bit of navigation required by the user. The site is available in Finnish and Swedish (the two official languages), with a very limited number of pages in English which are aimed at immigrants and emigrants and provide general information on the organisation and functions of the public administration. Previously (1997-2002), the Citizen's Guide functioned as the web service for the Finnish public sector. The Government Information Management Unit of the Ministry of Finance operates and updates the site.

The official Finnish business portal is found at www.yrityssuomi.fi which is only in Finnish and Swedish. This portal contains useful information on starting a business, developing a business plan, developing products and technologies and exporting. It is not clear if there are online transactions available that are aimed at businesses. Another business oriented official site is www.finpro.fi, which is also available in English, and focuses on foreign trade and investment.

3.1.4. France

Like the French government itself, France's e-government portal is highly centralised, using a top-down approach in providing access to a wide range of public information and services, while also linked to most of the municipal websites that provide local on-line services. The French national public administration portal www.service-public.fr was launched for public access in October 2000, replacing the former government portal which mainly functioned as a directory of all administration web sites. At present, the new portal provides access to 5000 French and foreign government websites, 11,000 government services and 13,000 officials. Furthermore, it contains 2400 practical information pages, 600 downloadable forms and offers 1200 predefined answers to frequently asked questions. It is accessed by more than 550,000 visitors (22% are foreigners) and about 3000 e-mails are received each month, with 10,000 people registered in the mailing list.

The Service-public portal was designed to achieve three main goals:

- Providing practical services through a comprehensive guide to first level information (official forms, FAQs, gateways for citizens, for professionals & enterprises, rights & procedures, official surveys, official journal, and public procurement advertisement);
- Informing the public through a newsletter on new regulations, on-line services, and job openings within the civil service;
- Guiding users through two main directories: one on public websites, another on government services (e-mail addresses, organisation charts and job titles are provided).

A powerful search engine is accessible from the site's main subject headings. The search can be targeted on a specific administrative issue or on practical information. Many topics are directly accessible from the home page. Service-public also provides access to subportals on financial and fiscal matters (www.minefi.gouv.fr), on social issues (www.net-entreprise.fr), and on employment (www.anpe.fr).

La Documentation Française, the French government agency responsible for publishing PSI, monitors the French portal and responds to user questions and suggestions. In partnership with the *Caisse des Depots* (the public financial body dedicated to local development), the service-public.fr platform was created to provide a citizen-centred one-stop shop by facilitating online data exchange between



national, regional and local administrative bodies. The system allows regional and local authorities to build unique local access points to e-government services by co-branding with the Service-public.fr government portal and gaining access to relevant local, regional and national data to be able to respond to the main queries of citizens.

One of the primary lessons learned in the French experience was that all levels of government have to be flexible and listen closely to the broad public audience whose expectations are rapidly increasing, often faster than the pace of new service provision.

3.1.5. Germany

While it had a relatively late start compared to other countries, such as Sweden and the UK, Germany has achieved good results in setting up its e-government, which was cited in a recent benchmarking report as a best practice example, particularly in the area of best practice sharing between Federal and Land governments.³ In fact, increasing emphasis is being placed on e-government as constituting a critical foundation for the development of the knowledge society in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The e-government portal *Bund.de* www.bund.de provides access to all of the German government websites. Launched in September 2000, it forms the cornerstone of the e-government initiative BundOnline 2005 www.bundonline2005.de which seeks to put all government agencies and whichever services it is possible to digitise on line by 2005. More than 100 authorities and departments have been working to put around 380 Federally provided services online in an effort to offer a comprehensive e-government package. The designers of the portal have tried to maintain a user-friendly orientation. Total funding for BundOnline through 2005 is estimated to be 1.65 Billion Euros, thus representing one of the most substantial investments on the part of the German Government and the largest e-government programme in Europe. The e-government initiative seen as a comprehensive modernisation project for Germany's public institutions.

One of the attractive features of the *Bund.de* portal is that its main links appear immediately in the opening page, thus requiring very little navigation by the user. However, there is no dedicated gateway for business. Besides the thematic links (including forms and applications, a job bank, tenders and procurement), there are also direct links to the Laender (Federal Regions) and to the local government level. In fact, this latter feature was being developed recently to allow expansion of the official government database to regional and local authorities.

Bund.de provides access to the public entities that are concerned with business development in the country, primarily the Federal Ministry for Economy and Labour www.bmwi.de (which still uses the Internet address of its previous incarnation, the Federal Ministry of Economy and Technology). Of the German government portals for business, one of the most important is iXPOS www.ixpos.de, oriented toward foreign trade. iXPOS is an initiative of the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour (BMWA), and the Federal Office for Foreign Trade (Bfai) is responsible for content. The portal is available in German and English and provides information on both the German economy (for foreign exporters and investors) and foreign markets.

3.1.6. Ireland

Ireland has set up a number of different portals that are dedicated to providing public sector information. The Government of Ireland portal www.irlgov.ie provides gateways to government organisations and information, the latter divided into information for citizens and for businesses. The portal generally serves only to provide links to the other more specific services. OASIS www.oasis.ie is the Irish Government's site for finding information on Public Services. This particular site is organised by themes, which are subdivided either by life events or topics.

³ Booz Allen Hamilton, 2002, *International e-Economy Benchmarking, Section 4*, "The e-Maturity of Governments" in *The World's Most Effective Policies for the e-Economy*, London, 19 November 2002.



From the central portal, a bit of navigation is required to find needed information and some of the links from www.irlgov.ie lead to Gaelic only sites. Given its legal requirement to put all material in Gaelic, much information is available in this language (and in some cases exclusively), obviously limiting the audience to those that both use Internet and know this language well.

BASIS www.basis.ie is the Irish Government's main business-oriented portal and is directly accessible from the central portal. It was developed to provide business with a single access point to all Government information and services. Among the key on-line services are government procurement/tenders and paying taxes online. There are also several automated entry processing forms available, and numerous business-relevant documents and studies are downloadable from the site.

BASIS was set up under the Government Action Plan "Implementing the Information Society in Ireland, undertaken by the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment. The site went online in May 2001 and continues to undergo upgrades to include further life events of concern to businesses. BASIS provides easy access to Government online services such as the Revenue Online Services (taxes) www.ros.ie and the Public Procurement Portal as well as a download bank for the most commonly used application forms. Furthermore, the portal provides links to the Enterprise Ireland regional offices.

BASIS works closely with REACH www.reach.ie, which is the Government cross-departmental agency set up to improve Irish Public Service care of customers. REACH seeks to integrate the services and implementation of e-government in Ireland.

Enterprise Ireland www.enterprise-ireland.com (supported by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment) is the publicly-funded entity mainly dedicated to supporting the development of business in the country, thus there are also numerous services and information for businesses in this agency's site. The agency supports not only the development of Irish businesses but also assists foreign investors in finding Irish partners and sites for investment, thus its website posts information in German, French, Italian and Spanish in addition to English and Gaelic.

3.1.7. Italy

The Italian government portal, Italia.gov.it, offers e-services and information to its users with special attention to accessibility and usability. The portal is structured into four main areas: information and e-services from government agencies, portal e-services, news, and interaction with the citizen. By adopting an innovative approach, some of the on-line solutions have become a model for subnational e-governments in Italy.

The main objective of the portal is to supply good services to citizens by emphasising user needs rather than the perspective of the government agency. Starting from the home page, by searching according to either life events or guidelines, the user can reach the requested contents only in three clicks. The choice of adopting life events as a point of reference for the organisation of information and services and a multi-channel front office provides citizens with both a user friendly and effective access to government agencies.

Another important service within the portal is the guided online support to citizens to overcome the barriers of bureaucratic language and find the necessary documents, forms and certificates that are not always known ahead of time. One example of this approach is the job search service that, starting from simple user questions, undertakes research and performs data extraction from official government documents and seeks job openings in what is usually a complex activity, especially for young people who are not accustomed to bureaucratic language.

From the national portal, citizens and businesses can gain access to a number of government organisations and their information and online services. Important online services for business are provided by the national tax authority, the *Agenzia delle Entrate* www.agenziaentrate.it, which allows citizens and businesses to declare income taxes, corporate taxes and VAT and to carry out all operations on line. The national customs authority, the *Agenzia della Dogana* www.agenziadogane.it allows users to start the procedure for customs declarations through its Telematic Customs Service and



Electronic Data Interexchange. Of particular interest to both citizens and businesses is the national social security service, *Istituto Nazionale per la Previdenza Sociale (INPS)* www.inps.it, which allows companies to report their employees' social contributions electronically through the on-line DM-10 function in addition to permitting citizens to monitor and verify their own national pension contributions on-line.

The portal of the *Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT)* (www.istat.it) aims to provide the public with improved access to statistical information that is available free of charge, rapidly and in a user-friendly manner. One of the most important features of the online ISTAT services is that users can generate their own statistical tables reflecting the type of information they are interested in. This is particularly useful to businesses that may be involved in market research and need to have a good overview of social and economic data referring to a particular territory.

Italy has a number of government entities and organisations that are dedicated to promotion of Italian enterprises and the development of business activities in Italy. For example, the portal of the Ministry of Industry www.minindustria.it provides access to news, legislation, documents and services.

Sviluppo Italia www.sviluppoitalia.it is Italy's National Agency for Economic and Enterprise Development, is responsible for inward investment development, particularly in areas of the country that have had economic difficulties. It offers a one-stop shop service to companies located in Italy with identification of appropriate locations, support in setting up investment initiatives, direct management of financial incentives for specific areas and after care. In order to support current and potential business operators, Sviluppo Italia has developed an interactive portal www.opportunitalia.it providing a variety of services and information for funding support and financing for businesses.

Italy's "sportello unico": one-stop shop for business

Access to public services and information for SMEs is available at many levels in Italy. In order to better understand the access path for businesses to PSI in Italy, we applied a bottom up approach, which leads to a local "one-stop shop" for business activities ("*sportello unico*"). At the local and provincial levels, companies can go through the "one-stop shops" ("*sportelli unici*") to gain access to specific portals for SMEs. The "one-stop shop" system is present in various municipalities throughout the country and has led to significant improvements for SMEs in gaining access to the information and services they need in order to operate within the often complicated legal, labour and fiscal requirements imposed by the government.

Since 1998 the municipal administrations (*comuni*) in Italy were given full responsibility for all administrative actions concerning business activities of private and public companies operating within their territory. This includes issuing licences to start a new activity or extending an existing one, and authorising permits to built new facilities and deciding on their location, etc. The one-stop shop represents a single point of interaction for citizens and businesses in carrying out all the procedures that were previously distributed among several administrative offices and has permitted an exchange of information between different administrations through information technology and data base integration.

The portals of various local and regional administrations also offer the possibility to SMEs to navigate, interact and find useful business information. Some examples are Lombardia imprese www.lombardia-pmi.it, Veneto Imprese www.veneto-pmi.it, and Piemonte imprese www.piemonte-pmi.it, which appear to be among the most user-oriented in Italy, and Portale.parma www.portale.parma.it of the Province of Parma, which offers online contents, services and integration with other administrative bodies. It is also important to mention that the portals of local, provincial and regional public administrations contain links to the national government portal and that this access is generally very easy and user friendly. Thus, the search for relevant public sector information by citizens or businesses could also take place from the bottom-up perspective—implying that Italy provides multiple access channels to its e-government.

In this survey we have focused mainly on portals of government entities, but there are also many private and parastatal organisations in Italy that have portals that offer large quantities of information for business or perform important functions in the Italian business environment.



While not officially a government organisation, *Confindustria* is the leading organisation representing the manufacturing and service industries in Italy, grouping together more than 111,000 member companies of all sizes. Confindustria is thus the principal voice of Italian business and it provides a number of important services as well as information to its members. Confindustria seeks to contribute to the country's economic growth and social progress by working together with political institutions and economic, social and cultural organisations, both national and international. The portal www.confindustria.it has excellent graphics and a high quality structure, allowing easy access to many kinds of information.

UNIONCAMERE www.unioncamere.it, the Italian association of all Chambers of Commerce, is another key actor in the Italian business environment. Its mission is to contribute to the modernisation of the institutions and to the competitiveness of Italian enterprises through the policies for local development and processes of public administration re-organisation in order to improve the services for businesses. *Infocamere* www.infocamere.it is the IT consortium of the Italian Chambers of Commerce developed and operates the national system linking Italy's 103 Chambers of Commerce and 300 branch offices through a high-speed, high-security electronic network. Since April 2000, *Infocamere* is an official Certification Authority for digital signature holders, having been admitted to the public list of such bodies envisaged by law. *Infocamere* provides a fully web-based application that allow businesses to register a new company and gain many other services. Infocamere is also a partner of the EBR European Economic Interest Group (EEIG), which was set up to run the European Business Register system.

The following are only a few of the many private portals aimed at Italian business:

- *CLUB PMI* www.clubpmi.it is the first club for SMEs on the web and offers a wide variety of information and services aimed specifically at SME needs. Membership is free of charge.
- *Marketplaceitaly* www.marketplaceitaly.it is a business-to-business portal dedicated to SMEs. It is structured as a meeting point for different subjects and it offers to its subscribers easy access to many interesting services.
- *Vortal impresa* www.vortalimpresa.it is a web site dedicated to business services. Translated into English, it offers news and advice for entrepreneurs, in particular on business support and facilitated financing.

3.1.8. Netherlands

The Dutch Government has an explicit commitment to e-government: its obligation to provide information and to improve the relationship with citizens and businesses is manifested in the *Government Information Act* which essentially provides the mandate for online PSI. The government has been active in monitoring its websites in order to maintain a high level of service and provides subsidies for local government bodies to promote integration of catalogues.

This commitment to online PSI is also seen in the series of upgrades the government has undertaken to make its central portal, www.overheid.nl, more user friendly. An initiative of the Ministry of the Interior and Relations of the Kingdom (*Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties*), www.overheid.nl was originally developed in 1999 and revised in 2001 and again in 2003. The site can be also accessed via the addresses www.nederland.nl and www.dutchgovernment.nl. The portal receives a large number of visitors, on average 12,000 hits a day, up from about 10,000 a day in 2001. Around 5 million Euro have been spent on its development.

User friendliness is emphasised by the use of simple graphics in primary colours, and the set-up of the site also reflects the Dutch reputation for practicality. At first glance the entrance page is easy to understand and provides access to all necessary government websites. According to the GOL presentation,⁴ the portal's primary function is to provide access to all government organisations; yet it is also to serve as a source of information. The latter was one of the features added in January 2001, with

⁴ Gotze J., 2001, *Country Reports on Portals* in <http://governments-online.org/articles/13.shtml>



the inclusion in the website of all official documents of the Dutch parliament and official announcements from national government publications. However, some of the access paths are a bit complicated, requiring three clicks or more.

Within *overheid.nl* the links are not all exposed in the entrance portal, but the themes are: it is necessary to click on the broader topics to gain access to more specific ones. Citizens can access regionally relevant authorities' websites and services by entering their postal codes. The *overheid* portal has a gateway dedicated to children and young people with pages and links that might interest this age group, a feature that is also increasingly used in e-government portals in Europe.

One problem for some users may be that the central web site is completely in Dutch, though there are English pages in the "guests" gateway which contain very general information. Outsiders and foreigners based in the Netherlands might have a difficult time understanding the information and navigating the site. It is not clear what all of the links are for someone who doesn't read Dutch, though there are English webpages further on in the government (*Regiering*) and selected ministry sites .

3.1.9. Spain

Spain's first government services portal was launched in September 2001. The Citizens Portal brings all of Spain's government bodies together in one website, with the aim that by 2004, citizens will be able to seek and receive most government services online. There are three gateways: citizens, businesses and public organisation. While Spain has not yet established any high-level e-government targets, it recently published an e-government action plan which is strongly aligned to the e-Europe initiative. A large number of public institutions, specifically 111 of them, already have their own pages on the Internet, but the central portal provides a unified access for citizens without their having to know the names of individual public bodies. The central portal offers the possibility of access in all official languages of the country in all the menus of navigation and in some contents. Moreover, there is a "*Portal Internacional*" in Spanish, English and French languages for foreigners about Spanish institutions and public administration. The development of the government Citizen's Portal builds on previous successes such as the Social Security smart card and the award-winning tax site.

Agencia Tributaria www.aeat.es

The Spanish Government has instituted the direct and extensive computerised sharing of tax information between the tax authorities and other public administration offices to avoid multiple individual submissions of tax certificates by citizens. In the past, citizens had to present paper certificates to accomplish different administrative processes related to taxation and the transfer of tax information from one level of administration to another; this process has now been replaced by notification and transmission of the contents of the paper certificates in digital format by the Tax Administration to the requesting administration, with the consent of the citizen in question. The system uses a secure electronic mail system between the Tax Administration and requesting *Publica Administration* to channel both the requests and the provision of information, with the prior issuing of a user certificate to enable the coding and signing of e-mails.

The complicating factor in the design of the portal in Spain has been that the country has at least three levels of government services, all of which wield a great deal of independent authority:

- The national or Central Government which is based in Madrid (the "Administración Pública")
- The Autonomous Community (regional) governments of specific regions (17 in all) and
- The local municipalities (known as "Ayuntamientos").



Subnational Portals in Spain

Given the high level of independence of different subnational entities, it may take some time to coordinate all public administration levels to become truly e-facilitated. However, an assessment by Level Data⁵ stated that, apart from the central level initiatives (of which the Citizen Portal is the main project), the Communities of Madrid and Catalonia (northeast Spain) as well as Aragon appear to be the most advanced.

Catalonia

The developments in the Catalonian region have been described by the Catalonian Government Secretary Antoni Vives as 'a quantum leap in terms of governance'. Under the Catalonian Open Administration (AOC) project, by March 2002 citizens and businesses would be able to handle local and regional transactions for 'life episodes' through a single website. Online services are available for registration of births, changes of address, accessing education and setting up a business. The project includes one-stop shops called 'access offices' and services delivered through digital television. The budget for the project is 250 million Euro which also covers the expense of supplying free smart cards containing digital signatures to the one million citizens who carry out frequent transactions with government.

Aragon

The strategic plan of the Government of the Autonomous Community of Aragon was to build up a portal of services that would bring together all government-provided information. This initiative began in 1997 with the construction of a web page with corporate character. The implementation of the portal of the Government of Aragon www.aragob.es expands and improves the availability of public services on-line. It is a multi-channel and multi-media portal, in which the user has some control over the management of selected contents. The portal combines communications and services with easy access for its users. Public services for businesses include: declaration of corporation tax, registration of a new company, submission of data to statistical offices, and public procurement.

3.1.10. Sweden

Sweden launched a public sector portal *SwedenDirekt* (www.sverigedirekt.gov.se) in 1997. Access to the portal is very easy and user friendly. The portal in turn provides access to all government websites, including direct links to the *Riksdag* (Swedish parliament), the Government, the county councils, municipalities and various government agencies. The Government action programme⁶ explicitly states that all central government bodies should have websites of high quality with home pages linked to *SwedenDirekt*.

In *SwedenDirekt*, information about Sweden's public sector can be searched by key word and by topic, in alphabetical order or by ministry. The portal also provides guidance to users who don't know which authority can handle their questions. The search engine enables users to search for information exclusively on Swedish public sector websites, and it is possible to narrow the search further to a specific website or certain type of website. Thus, for example, the search can be restricted to all government authorities or to one or all municipalities. Users can also find phone numbers, postal codes and e-mail addresses to all the organisations listed.

The primary target group of the portal consists of citizens and residents of Sweden, which means that most material is only available in Swedish. There is also a possibility to access the website through different languages, including Finnish, English, French, Bosnian, Serb, Spanish, Arabic and Persian. Yet only the information about Swedish PSI and a description of the portal are available in these languages.

⁵ Action Plan of Spanish Government in www.infoxxi.es

⁶ Gotze J., 2001, *Country Reports on Portals* in <http://governments-online.org/articles/13.shtml>



SwedenDirect has a section entitled *Portals providing societal information*, which has the following sub-sections:

- The Community Guide
- Portals with regional content
- Portals tailored to specific topics
- Websites in support of themes and campaigns

The gateway to Sweden www.sweden.se is the official English-language web site for information about the country for the outside world. This is a portal site offering a joint platform for organisations that provide information about Sweden to a foreign audience, including potential investors and tourists. The aim of Sweden.se is to facilitate access to English-language information about Sweden. Information about Sweden ranges from basic facts about the country to business issues, politics, news, culture and entertainment. Here the user can find a full range of information on a particular subject category, compiled by the organisations behind Sweden.se. Sweden.se also has a collection of links that gives users access to numerous government and non-government organisations that provide relevant information in English.

The Swedish Government seeks to stimulate growth and employment through the creation of new enterprises and developing existing businesses. Businesses can find enterprise-relevant information in the Ministry of Industry's web site www.industry.ministry.se, which is also available in English. This site can be accessed through the main government portal. The Swedish Business Development Agency and *Almi Företagspartner* are other Government organisations that are committed to helping enterprises with measures such as providing information and advice, sponsoring projects and supplying financial support.

3.1.11. United Kingdom

The UK Online portal (www.ukonline.gov.uk) is a website⁷ which provides a single point of entry to a wide range of government information and services. The priority in developing the site has been to ensure that it is user friendly and accessible. Content is organised around the needs of the citizen to make dealing with government as easy and seamless as possible.

The portal provides a structured way for users to access all existing public sector information available on-line, representing the most direct route to over 1,000 UK government websites. Some of the information is organised into topic areas or life episodes: moving, having a baby, going abroad, learning to drive, death and bereavement, dealing with crime, looking after someone, and looking for a job. A user can also join government consultations or discussion groups to exchange views with others. The site is designed to give users an opportunity to make their voices heard, thus contributing to e-democracy.

The portal also contains other services and features, including:

- 'Quick Find' - a powerful search engine, which guides users directly to the right information, cutting through the maze of government.
- 'Real time government news', providing an easy way to receive announcements and advice.
- 'Citizen Space' – a section to make it easy for users to find out about the government's plans, and contribute to the formulation of new policies. It is also easy to find information about elected representatives and registering to vote.

⁷ Dharssi, T., Murray, B., 4 December 2001, *SMEs & Access To The Digital Economy, UK Challenges & Priorities*, presented at 2nd DEEDS Policy Group Meeting, Düsseldorf,.



- 'Easy Access' pages, which provide simpler access to the portal for those who are visually impaired or have low reading skills. These pages work especially well with alternative digital access media.
- Access to the established open.gov website

[UK Online for Business](#) is a partnership between government and industry that helps UK businesses improve their performance by using ICTs, representing part of the Government effort to establish the UK as a world leader in e-commerce. UK Online for Business does the following:

- Raising awareness and understanding of Doing Business Online.
- Providing advice and help to small companies on using ICTs.
- Working with businesses, professional and trade associations via a Partnership Programme.
- Producing booklets written in clear jargon-free language.
- Providing a network of advisers whose advice is cost-effective, jargon-free and independent.
- Advising on how to put technologies into practice.

Ukonline.gov.uk has not replaced direct contact with public service providers. Instead it offers citizens choice in the way they access government services. In conjunction with the *Government Gateway* www.gateway.gov.uk, ukonline.gov.uk offers the citizen a quick and easy means of carrying out transactions with the government over the Internet. The Government Gateway is the website in which users register for online government services. It is an important part of the government's strategy of delivering 'joined up' government, enabling people to communicate and make transactions with government from a single point of entry. The Government Gateway accepts, authenticates and routes electronic transactions with Government. By using the Government Gateway as a central method of authentication, citizens or businesses can use any of the available applications to carry out a transaction, and even swap between them as appropriate. After citizens or businesses register to perform electronic transactions, they can carry out secure authenticated transactions with any of the connected departments using the same identification credential, thus providing added convenience for users.

The Government Gateway provides access for citizens and businesses to all government services (in central departments, devolved administrations and local authorities) using one single authentication credential. The services will be available on a 24/7 basis, enabling transactions to be sent at any time, and the system has the capacity to handle high volumes for peak filing periods. The Government Gateway provides the infrastructure required for true joined up Government by splitting and joining XML transactions. A user can send one transaction that involves several departments, while the underlying complexity remains hidden. The first four transactions enabled by the Government Gateway are the following:

- PAYE End of Year returns for Inland Revenue
- VAT returns for HM Customs and Excise
- IACS (Integrated Administration and Control System)
- Area Aid Applications to the Department of the Environment, Food and Regional Affairs

3.2. Accession Countries

A limited number of Accession Countries' websites was surveyed insofar as there were pages and information in languages the research team could understand. A number of sites have English and/or German-language pages, but these tend to be aimed at visitors, investors or foreigners living in the country and thus do not provide a good idea of the services and information for businesses. Below we provide only a brief overview of these countries' portals to provide a general idea of the type of portal development found in countries that will soon be joining the European Union.

3.2.1. Estonia

The Estonian Government has a portal <http://www.riik.ee> with pages available in Estonian, Russian and English. The English language site is fairly extensive, including press releases and forms for foreigners who want to live in Estonia. The site does not seem to have special gateways for citizens and



businesses, although these might be contained in the Estonian-language site. At present, the government through the Estonian Informatics Centre is working towards placing forms on the Internet that can be used by citizens and businesses, for example, Form E1 to declare a non-resident's income from entrepreneurship in Estonia. The Estonian National Motor Vehicle Registration Centre already accepts the forms available on the site.

3.2.2. Hungary

The Hungarian Government Portal <http://www.ekormanyzar.hu> has extensive numbers of pages in English and German in addition to Hungarian. The site provides access to government agencies and administration bodies and some business information. The portal content is organised by topic, and there are gateways aimed at different age groups. In fact, there is quite a bit of information available for citizens, though it is not clear where it is possible to find the information related to businesses, other than basic information.

3.2.3. Slovenia

Slovenia will soon be joining the European Union and information technology is developing very rapidly. Slovenia's e-government is located in a unified state portal www.gov.si that is targeted to citizens, economic subjects, employees in public administration and all the public administration bodies. The website is presented in two languages, Slovenian and English.

With this website, the Government wishes to improve the flow of information between the administration and citizens and to publicise its activities to the widest possible audience of Internet users. There are daily government press releases and other information on current government projects and events issued by ministries and government services. The portal operates in a way that the users will soon be able to read the news from the public administration and will also be able to communicate with an administration expert, ask questions and read the answers. In this single site, the user can access news on the operation of the state administration, check legislation and legal regulations.

Extensive information is provided for Slovenian citizens and companies on a number of administrative and commercial issues (i.e., purchase of an apartment, services of real-estate agencies, banks, builders, notaries, administration units, tax branch offices, services for life situations are combined). There is also access to all information needed for doing business in Slovenia, ranging from investments to establishing an enterprise as well as direct links to the relevant portals and websites.

3.2.4. Poland

The official Polish portal www.poland.pl has web pages in Polish as well as English. The portal is full of information and services both for citizens and businesses on topics ranging from how to travel to how to invest in Poland. The directory situated in the central part of the home page has links to all information on the state, politics, society, life events, art and culture, computers and telecommunications, business and economy. News from the state administration and on world events also can be found on the portal. The site has a special gateway for accessing information and services related to banking and finance and is organised along three access levels starting from the main portal.

3.3. Outside of Europe

Outside of Europe, two of the most cited government portals are those of Canada and the United States. Viewed from the top down, the Canadian portal takes a more user friendly approach, channelling users to the gateway of interest. The US government portal also uses gateways, though also including gateways for civil servants and foreign governments. The explicitness of the latter is a feature rarely found in other portals, but is also associated with the fact that the US government seeks to make available as much public sector information as possible (particularly with regard to economic and business information that might interest foreign investors or foreign governments that want to learn more about the United States).



A major difference in appearance is that the US site is aimed at a generic target audience, while the Canadian site emphasises the differences between Canadians and non-Canadians and the site is liberally sprinkled with icons of the Canadian flag. This said, in comparison with the US site, the Canadian portal is far less intimidating and perhaps more user friendly (in particular toward Canadian businesses). On the other hand, the US site provides access to massive quantities of information and relevant government bodies; yet once inside the various departments, navigation can be complicated and it is not guaranteed that the correct information will be found by someone who doesn't know what a particular agency does. The search function accesses numerous documents, but then the user has to click on each to see whether it is really of interest--often difficult to do quickly. A particular strength of the Canadian portal is that to find specific online services, it is not necessary to navigate to a specific government agency..

3.3.1. Canada

The Canadian government's portal www.canada.gc.ca is often cited as a best-practice example of e-government and thus as a model for other governments in their attempt to create an effective and user-oriented electronic public information and service portal. Appearing in English and French, the portal has gateways for Canadians (citizens), non-Canadians (foreign residents, visitors and researchers), and Canadian business. These gateways are organised into both target audiences (i.e. youth, seniors, children, aboriginal peoples) and topics. The portal applies a one-stop shop approach, connecting the user to the areas of interest with a few clicks. Publications and regional portals can be accessed from the home page. The format is quite simple and also presented in a user-friendly format. Another user-friendly feature is the bar "how do I find information on..."

Canada's Business Gateway: providing Added Value and Interactivity for firms.

The business gateway <http://businessgateway.ca/en/hi> provides a single access point to all the government services and information needed to start, run and grow a business. Within the site, numerous interactive business tools are provided. These include patent, trademark and trade databases, financial ratio calculators, and an *Interactive Business Planner* (which is billed as the first business planning software product designed specifically to operate on the web). Over the Internet, the IBP helps business people prepare a three-year plan for new or existing businesses. Another interactive tool is the *Interactive Export Planner. Performance Plus* is an on-line performance benchmarking tool that lets small businesses see how they compare to their competitors within Canadian industry. This extensive selection of interactive and other relevant applications can provide real added value for Canadian companies. In order to ensure that the site provides effective services, the system solicits feedback from users. While most of the national government business sites covered in the survey contained varying levels and quantities of information, none of them contained the highly sophisticated interactive tools such as those provided free by the Canadian government.⁸ *Industry Canada* was responsible for developing most of these on-line tools.

Furthermore, within the site "Federal E-forms and services" the Business Gateway provides various forms and possibilities for online transmission. For example, online transmission is possible for business registration and corporations directorate electronic filing, search for sources of financing and providing the government Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) with feedback on trade and investment barriers for Canadian businesses in foreign markets. It is possible also for companies to report goods exported to the government on line. Business tax forms, however, were not included in this particular site.

From a "bottom-up" perspective, Canadian companies can gain access to the central government portal by following several different access paths. In fact, the multiple access possibilities reinforce the strength of the central portal by providing different opportunities for firms in various parts of the country to reach the same information. Access can be gained by going through a municipal portal: in the web research exercise that was conducted, it was possible to access the national site directly from the portal

⁸ It is possible that other such applications are indeed available through the government portals, but they are not easy to find without extensive navigation.



of the City of Vancouver, BC www.city.vancouver.bc.ca. Another mode of access is through the Provincial Chamber of Commerce, in this case the British Columbia Chamber of Commerce www.bcchamber.org, which in turn provided a link to the Business Services portal www.smallbusinessbc.ca or <http://smallbusinessbc.ca> from which it was possible to reach the national Government portal or other national and regional business-oriented sites. One very useful national government site is *Business Start-up Assistant (BSA)* <http://bsa.cbasc.org>, which is billed as 'your information site for starting a business in Canada.' Linked to the central Government portal's business gateway, BSA provides a series of information as well as interactive on-line services.

One of the newest digital services offered by the Government of Canada is the *Wireless Portal Prototype* www.gc.ca (on a wireless device, such as a cell phone or a PDA), which is currently still in the pilot stage. The information and services currently available through the prototype include an electronic directory (the *Government Electronic Directory Services (GEDS)*), which includes phone and fax numbers as well as postal and e-mail addresses of Members of Parliament (and dialling services for cellular phones). Listings for Canadian toll-free numbers and a government employees' phone directory are also part of the service. Another feature shows the estimated waiting times for crossing the US-Canadian border at certain locations. While this service has yet to be used significantly by the public at large, it provides an indication of the future evolution of e-government services as some of the more advanced e-governments move toward more advanced digital multi-channel delivery and 'm' government.

3.3.2. United States

FirstGov www.FirstGov.gov is the US government's official gateway to all government information. The site has won numerous awards since its creation and serves as a model for other governments which are seeking to set up effective e-governments. The portal provides access to more than 51 million web pages of the federal and state as well as local and tribal governments. It also includes cross-agency portals that are aimed at certain target groups: seniors, students, people with disabilities and exporters. FirstGov provides access to information and services that are organised into customer gateways: 1) citizens, 2) businesses and non-profits, 3) federal employees and 4) government-to-government. According to the "About FirstGov.gov" description of the portal, most of the pages are not available on commercial websites. Desired information can be accessed via an integrated search engine, which is described as "the most powerful search of government anywhere on the Internet." In order to ensure customer satisfaction (by the way, the term used within the site is "customer" and not user—thus indicating a very commercial approach in providing e-government), FirstGov participates in an on-line customer satisfaction survey by applying the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which has been used by many US companies in the private sector.

FirstGov went on-line on September 22, 2000 and was further developed in 2001 and 2002 with participation of the Office of Citizen Services and Communication of the General Services Administration (GSA), which administers the initiative, and 22 federal agencies. Yet the project got its real start from an Internet entrepreneur who donated a powerful search engine to the government.

The idea behind the portal is that citizens should be able to find the information and services they need without necessarily knowing how the US government is organised and which agency provides what services. This is important, since in the United States some services are provided by state or local authorities, for example drivers licenses are issued by state authorities, whereas local authorities are involved with building and environmental permits. The tax structure is also more complicated than in many European countries, since most U.S. states and some local authorities levy income taxes, in addition to the usual property and motor vehicle taxes. Furthermore, FirstGov also provides access links to a number of services provided by private entities.

An important new feature is the establishment of the Spanish language FirstGov aimed the growing population of Spanish-speakers in the United States. This latter feature ensures that an important minority group is not excluded from US government online services for linguistic reasons. While the content and structure of this site are not identical to the English-language FirstGov, it is organised into



themes that would more likely be of interest to Spanish-speakers in the United States. Thousands of pages are included in the site.

The portal FedWorld www.fedworld.gov is another gateway to government information and is managed by the National Technical Information Service (NTIS). The NTIS is an agency of the US Department of Commerce and established the site as early as 1992 to serve as the on-line locator service for information disseminated by the US government. At present the gateway is linked to FirstGov and it provides more specific information than the central portal. FedWorld provides access to federal job openings, government scientific and technical publications and websites, automobile emissions information, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) (the US tax authority), and historic Supreme Court Decisions (between 1937 and 1975).

The US government has an extensive series of websites providing information and access to services for citizens and businesses. The Small Business Administration (SBA) www.sba.gov is primarily concerned with smaller US businesses, but there are many other Government Departments and Agencies, especially the Department of Commerce, that publish information and provide services to SMEs. Also, for example, the US Department of Agriculture Foreign Agriculture Service www.fas.usda.gov publishes a series of reports and studies on export and/or investment opportunities for US food and agriculture firms in foreign countries. These are particularly useful to SMEs that may not have the resources to conduct or purchase extensive market studies.

4. Conclusions and Implications

It is said that 'knowledge is power,' thus information gained by enterprises can give them the power to compete in an increasingly competitive economy, not only within an enlarged Europe, but also within a larger global economy. Governments have made significant investments in e-governments that provide information and services to citizens and businesses, seeking to achieve greater administrative integration, efficiency and responsiveness; achieve a better relationship between government and citizens/businesses; provide new and innovative ways to perform administrative procedures and fulfil fiscal and social contributions reporting obligations; and save time and money for users by bringing government to their home or office computers (or other digital devices, as the case may be).

The e-government portals surveyed and their associated information and services are as different as the countries that have established them. Each portal reflects the national context from which it has emerged in terms of approach, language, complexity and presentation. While more or less all of the portals provide access to PSI, the look, the feel and the style are all quite different. While all contain information and in most cases also online services for businesses and citizens, the way they are presented varies substantially in terms of access, structure and content. For example, the Dutch site is very practical and user-friendly, using bright primary colours and simple shapes. The US site, on the other hand, contains a tremendous amount of information and services, and certainly predominates in terms of the sheer quantity of PSI backed by the authority of the American government. Italy's government portal and the country's e-government effort in general have contributed significantly to streamlining, unifying, simplifying, and improving the efficiency of often complicated and confusing administrative and fiscal procedures. Ireland's central portal directs users to dedicated sub-portals that provide different types of information and services, depending on the user, without providing overwhelming quantities of material that can lead to confusion.

While the innovations in e-government introduced under the initiatives outlined above have great potential to change the way citizens and businesses interact with their governments, it will require further in-depth analysis to understand how effective they are in terms of actual user numbers, access, money saved, reliability, security, and user ease and satisfaction. Since many of the features have only been in operation for a very short time, it remains to be seen how they evolve over time. Among the limiting factors may be not only the access of SMEs to the Internet, but the confidence of the users in the information and services and the validity of the transactions with public bodies. Availability and reliability remain important concerns in assessing the value of PSI.



PSI remains one of the most important and critical areas by which governments can provide information and knowledge to citizens. By providing access from the central portals to relevant documents as well as other useful contents, national governments are providing added value for companies. Of course, the amount of information placed on line and the quality of the material does vary sharply from country to country and from agency to agency, and quantity and quality are not necessarily correlated. Also the access paths can sometimes be complicated, thus much useful information may be placed in the websites, but users may not know about it or may not be able find it due to the fact that these documents are "hidden" in sector- or topic-specific compartments to which access is not necessarily straightforward. For example, the US government publishes a vast wealth of useful documents on the Internet, but unless a user knows the path or which of the many federal agencies publishes the information, it can often be difficult to gain access to them. It is not always easy to navigate the government sites, since each reflects the nature of the department that set it up. Thus integration is a crucial factor in the usefulness of government portals.

In conclusion, this survey has simply sought to provide an introduction and an overview of central government portals in different countries. E-government and PSI have emerged as important new elements in the relationship between governments and citizens and businesses: in fact, in the future the types of PSI made available and the level of interactivity will increase as more services are put on-line (reflecting the commitment made to eEurope 2005 by EU Member States) and governments continue to expand multichannel access.

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