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Developing e-government competencies for local government

Introduction

In Spring 2005 OPM[®] (Office for Public Management) was contracted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to develop a set of core competencies for local e-government. The resulting competency framework, which is now in use in local authorities across England, consists of three tools: a framework setting out the core competencies people within local authorities need to bring about effective e-government; a diagnostic tool to help authorities assess where they are now in terms of e-government; and a development model to help them plan how to get to where they want to be. It also includes a case study report showing how the tools have been used by authorities. Further details of the core competency framework can be found at www.lamip.org or www.ecapacitybuilding.com

This article outlines the methodology we used to develop the competency framework, and looks at the main challenges and how we worked to overcome them.

Context

E-government can be defined as:

'...the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees.'

– *At the Dawn of e-Government*, Deloitte Research, 2000, p1

ODPM (the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) recognises the potential of e-government to transform local government services and local democracy. It could engage people who are currently excluded from the democratic process, facilitate the sharing of information within and between councils and other organisations, and offer more choice and convenience to service users, as well as increasing the speed and efficiency of the processes that underpin services.¹ Central and local government were given the target of making all services available electronically by December 2005.

The drive towards local e-government lies within the wider context of the desire for a more efficient public sector (e.g. the Gershon Report); ongoing legislative reform such as the Children Act 2004; and pressure for continuous service improvement, as evidenced by the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process carried out by the

¹ *The National Strategy for Local e-Government*, ODPM (November 2002), p8

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Audit Commission. To meet these challenges, local authorities need to make a number of complex strategic choices, including:

- which outcomes to focus on
- how to work with partners
- how to work with local communities
- how to develop, procure and deliver services that contribute to outcomes and, within this,
 - develop and apply area-based information systems that capture user and resident data
 - organise customer service centre and back office operations, including shared support services where necessary
 - develop processes of co-production with users, partners and others.

In this context, all authorities need to understand the potential contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) to sustainable, customer-focused change and efficient service delivery.

'...e-government is not a technical issue but is about service transformation / improvement, enabled (where possible) by technology. E-government is not the preserve of the head of ICT.'

- 'Delivering local e-government: An analysis of governance, roles and skills required', *SOCITM Insight*, August 2004, p31

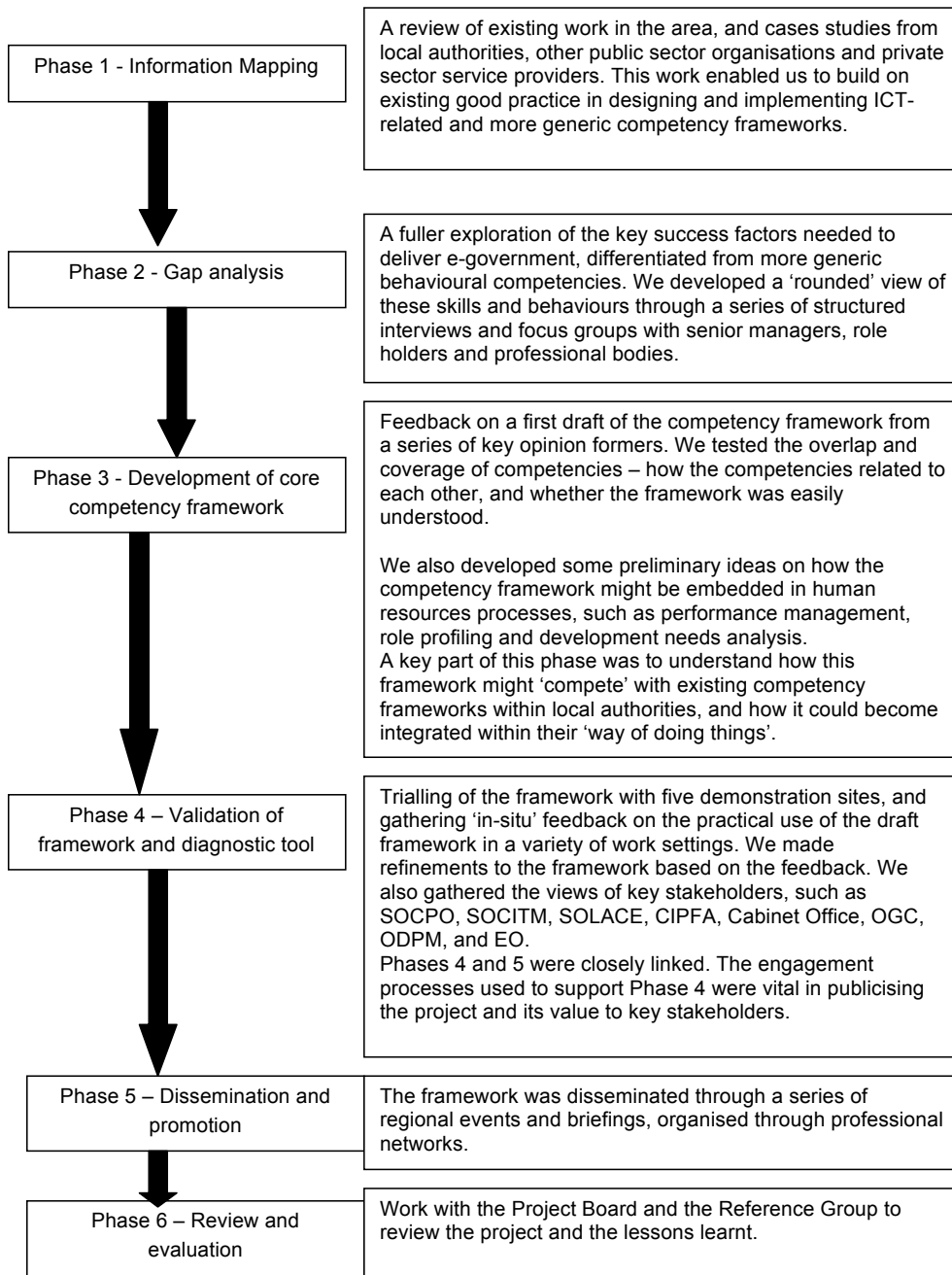
The success of local e-Government depends on the effective deployment of appropriately skilled and knowledgeable people, and the creation of a supportive culture. But it would be too simplistic to say that the 'people' challenge is to help IT professionals develop 'soft' skills and everyone else develop 'hard' skills. To achieve the potential benefits of investment in technology, all managers need to understand how ICT can be used to improve their services and engagement processes.

An ODPM sponsored IDeA report, *People and e-Government: Change, Capacity and Skills for e-Government* (May 2004), found that the competencies needed to perform the functions necessary to support effective e-government had not been clearly articulated. Consequently, OPM was contracted by ODPM to develop a competency framework to:

- Help local authorities develop the capacity to make the most of e-tools and processes
- Minimise potential risks arising from lack of leadership, programme management, business analysis or organisational change competencies
- Provide a means to engage managers and elected members with the e-agenda.

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Methodology



Developing the competency framework

There were three key challenges we faced in the project; ensuring the outcome of our work did not undermine the diversity within local government by placing unreasonable demands on small authorities while still be of use and vale to larger authorities. Second, ensuring our work did not undermine existing competency frameworks for managers or specialist roles developed at the local level. Thirdly, understanding government's wider ambitions for e-government and the role local government had to play within this wider agenda.

(i) Meeting local needs

Local authorities in England vary in size, structure and nature; small district authorities, large county and metropolitan councils, ranging in size from populations of 60,000 residents to 1,000,000. Each authority has the responsibility to respond to the unique needs of its communities and the obligation to deliver national strategic priorities, such as Every Child Matters. One of the key areas of change has been around e-government, and a review of authorities reveals authorities are at different stages of implementing the e-Government agenda and making use of ICT. Thus the competency framework had to be flexible and allow individuals and authorities to select from a menu of competencies to meet their particular needs.²

A major design consideration was whether to provide layers of detail in the material or leave it at a high level, with the detail needed for local application being worked through locally. We anticipated that either approach would have its critics: too much detail would invite comments such as 'that doesn't apply here'; 'do you really expect us to do all this?' or 'that's unworkable'; while too little detail might bring the response, 'you haven't told us what to do' or 'it's too broad to be useful'. We therefore aimed for a balance, with a framework that could be tailored locally without affecting its basic architecture, but that recognised some common requirements on local authorities and the need to encourage universal good practice.

To support authorities in applying the competency framework to their local needs and strategic objectives, we produced a diagnostic tool and development model. The model helps to identify where individual authorities are now, what they need to do to achieve their desired outcomes, and what types of competencies their people need.

² Building on examples of best practice within Competency and Emotional Intelligence, *Benchmarking Survey 2004/05*, and discussion with the Editor, Neil Rankin, November 2004; *A Practical Guide to Competencies*, Whiddett, S. & Hollyforde, A. (2003) CIPD

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We aimed for content that was specific rather than 'broad-brush', but not so technical as to exclude people with less managerial or ICT knowledge. Although we recognised that the framework had to be underpinned by key generic managerial skills such as teamwork, communication, people management, customer focus, results orientation, problem solving and planning and organising, we focused on what was critical and unique about the requirements of local e-government.

(ii) Fitting with existing frameworks

The majority of local authorities had an existing internal competency framework in place and / or referred to external frameworks in the area, such as the Skills for the Information Age (SFIA) and OGC's framework for procurement, programme and project management skills.³ Hence it was important that the competency framework 'added value' and did not simply replicate existing generic or specialist frameworks.

We encouraged users to link the e-government framework to others they were using, typically generic management frameworks and specialist technical frameworks. For example, in the final design we outlined behaviours that *illustrate* the competency in action, rather than providing an exhaustive definition, and encouraged users to update their existing competency framework through a 'pick and mix' approach. We also mapped the core competencies against more specialist frameworks such as SFIA and OGC, to signpost consistencies and further information.

(iii) What should 'e-government' achieve?

Feedback from local authorities and representative bodies told us that there was some scepticism about e-government. For example, some respondents felt that the requirement for authorities to have 100% of services on-line by December 2005 encouraged a short-term, 'tick box' mentality rather than an integration of ICT into longer-term strategic thinking. Furthermore, in several authorities e-government was seen as a technological rather than a service improvement issue, and was not embedded within the strategic decision-making processes of the organisation.

It was clear from our initial research that the terminology of 'e-government' had a limited shelf-life, and that many authorities believed its focus was too narrow to meet their needs. For example, people working in the ICT area within Birmingham City Council

³ SFIA is a model of the skills needed to develop effective information systems, deeper understanding of the skill sets required by ICT practitioners in different sectors. Further information can be found at www.sfia.org.uk. Further information on the work of OGC is at www.ogc.gov.uk.

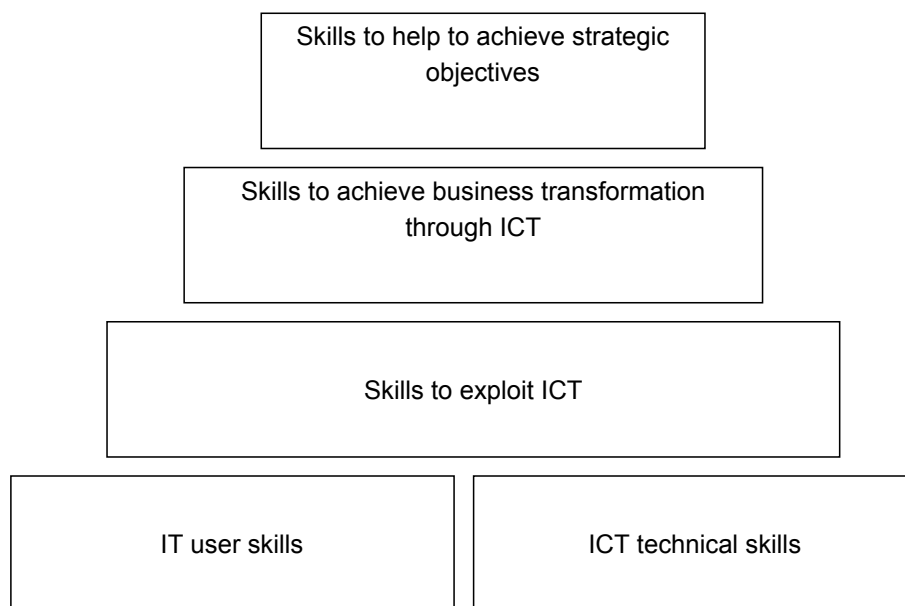
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have deliberately positioned their role as providing business solutions in partnership with service areas, rather than simply implementing e-government and ICT projects. In several authorities, the debate on e-Government had moved on; and it was clear that the competency framework had to facilitate the sustained and strategic contribution of ICT to business transformation and citizen-focused service delivery. However, the framework also had to 'give a hand up' to authorities that had not made significant progress with the e-government agenda. Therefore we mapped the different types and levels of skills needed to deliver the e-government agenda on the following model. The competency framework was designed mostly around the two upper levels: 'skills to help to achieve strategic objectives' and 'skills to achieve business transformation through ICT', although we did consider the other levels to a greater or lesser extent.

Fig 1: The Types and Levels of Skills Needed to Deliver the e-Government Agenda



IT user skills – what skills do I need to use my IT system? For some authorities supporting users to develop their IT skills is paramount. These technical skills were not

covered within the framework as we believed they were covered adequately by national qualifications such as e-skills Passport and the European Computer Driving Licence⁴.

ICT technical skills – what skills do I need to design, implement and maintain the technical infrastructure, IT systems and relevant protocols? These technical and operational skills were covered in a limited way, focusing on the critical and more widely applicable areas.

Skills to exploit ICT – what skills do I and others need in order to use current and new technology better? Here the driver is ICT and many of the underlying structures, interactions and processes remain the same. E-government is predominantly seen as demanding skills in managing and implementing ICT projects, with a change management component. This approach is often criticised for seeing e-government as an ‘end in itself’, and we were conscious of moving away from this in the design of the framework.

Skills to achieve business transformation through ICT – the focus is on how to transform services, the role of the local government officer, ways of working, and interactions between the council and its citizens⁵. E-Government is viewed as a part of wider business change, and therefore demands a significantly wider skill set than technical or project management skills. Agents of change must be able to challenge business processes and ways of working, facilitate cultural change and drive through changes. In this approach e-Government is seen as a means to an end.

Skills to help to achieve strategic objectives – the focus is on what is needed to achieve long-term strategic objectives, and how services can be delivered in new and innovative ways. ICT is seen as one building block to achieving this, and demands wide-ranging strategic, consultancy, change and business analysis skills. Furthermore it demands working across organisational and professional boundaries. This is also reflected in some initial findings from an ESRC funded project into the impact of ICT based applications in organisations:

‘(People must) think outside their departments and immediate communities of practice...(this) depends upon the tasks performed, or information generated, by other actors both ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ in the business process. This means

⁴ For further information see www.e-skilspassport.com and www.ecdl.co.uk.

⁵ FITLOG (ibid) p12

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that organizational actors have to understand their roles and actions in terms of the business processes of the company...'

– *Enterprise Systems Mediated Transformation*, H. Knox, D. O'Doherty, T. Vurdubakis, C. Westrup (2005) p2 – findings from ESRC funded project 'The Role of ICT based applications in business knowledge processes' (RE-334-25-0012)

From this perspective, e-government becomes redundant to some extent, as ICT and, more specifically, the collection and use of information becomes the defining feature.

Delivering change

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell (2000) explains how certain ideas, behaviours and products become 'contagious' whereas others don't. Contagious change happens when three interrelated factors – content; context and carriers – come together, and the 'new' tips over into accustomed practice. These ideas provide a useful way to explain the design and roll-out decisions for the e-Government competency framework and how it found its place in the market

Content

Gladwell shows how certain messages, products and ideas 'stick' when they compel us to action: receivers are able to make sense of the message in relation to their personal context and the move to action is made as easy as possible.

For example, a senior human resources manager in a mobile telecommunications company – one of our private sector case studies – emphasised the importance of explaining clearly to users the personal benefits of a competency framework in simple and shared language, rather than HR or consultant speak. We therefore took an iterative approach to the design of the framework, seeking feedback on the language and structure as well as the content. It was important that we did not use technical jargon, bland descriptions or the language of e-government.

The manager also stressed the importance of embedding the competency framework within someone's immediate world, rather than it being seen as a separate HR process.

Moreover, the final version of the tool contains short case studies and vignettes of how the tools can be used in practice by a range of different people, such as '*A service manager might run a facilitated session with their team leaders using the diagnostic to assess current capability and development needs and then devise a development programme using the competency framework*'.

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OPM is currently supporting ODPM's dissemination of the competency framework by delivering regional workshops to managers responsible for human resources, organisational development, ICT, project and programmes, e-champions and people from a range of regional improvement and support agencies. The workshops provide people with an opportunity to try out the three tools in the competency suite (core competency framework, development model and diagnostic tool), introduce them to the case study report showing how the tools have been used by authorities, and allow them to begin formulating their own authorities' action plans for implementing e-government and considering how the tools can help them.

Context

Gladwell also describes how people's environments fundamentally affect their actions. Feedback from our case study organisations and potential users emphasised the importance of making sure people can clearly see the link between the competency framework and the strategic objectives of the organisation. Feedback from potential users during the initial design indicated that there was suspicion of centrally imposed frameworks and initiatives, and some 'initiative fatigue'. Potential users also had to be clear how the competency framework and supporting tools linked to other national initiatives around e-government and existing competency frameworks in general.

In designing and publicising the framework, we focused on how the tools could deliver the outcomes that authorities wanted, and how they helped authorities meet other demands and pressures, such as the drive for efficiency and CPA. As previously mentioned, we also made explicit reference to existing material available through SFIA, OGC and EO, and other projects within the overall e-government capacity-building programme.

Carriers

Gladwell emphasises the role of a small number of key individuals in creating change – connectors, mavens and salesmen. Connectors are people who are well connected with others, and play an active role in different social networks. Mavens are people recognised as having a lot of useful information and knowledge, who consequently influence our decisions. Salesmen actively persuade others to do something.

At the outset of the project we carried out a comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise to identify the connectors, mavens and salesmen for e-government and the implementation of competency frameworks within local authorities. We invited

representatives from a range of different stakeholders to be members of a reference group to comment on draft materials, advise on implementation and pinpoint key individuals and local authorities to involve and inform. Members included representatives from:

- Targeted professional groups such as SOCITM (Society of Information Technology Management).
- Other agencies providing support to local authorities, such as the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), The Employers' Organisation for local government (EO) and ODPM.
- HR professional bodies such as the Society of Chief Personnel Officers (SOCPO) and Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD).
- Key decision makers such as Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).
- Influential government departments such as the Cabinet Office.
- Specialists in the skill areas such as e-Skills UK and OGC.

We also extended our reach to individuals performing the key roles by accessing different regional professional networks. These networks enabled us to gather feedback from, engage in the use of the products by and market to connectors, mavens and salesmen within individual local authorities.

Conclusions

The process of implementing this new framework is continuing. By sharing our thinking and work to date openly we hope to encourage both those involved in the local e-government agenda and their HR colleagues, to think about their own work in this area, and also to stimulate a wider debate about competencies and their use in local government to support the modernisation agenda through a model of change such as Tipping Point.

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www.lamip.org (for copies of the framework)

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