

Opening Keynote

e-Government for Better Citizen Services

Talal Abu-Ghazaleh

Chairman, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization

IT gives me a great honor to speak to you today at the annual eGovernment conference in Bahrain, with a conception to move towards a more inclusive knowledge-base society through e-Government. It is most appropriate that this event takes place in a country that has led the eGovernment revolution in our region and beyond. I would like to pay warm tribute to His Majesty the King, HRH the Prime Minister, HRH the Crown Prince, and to salute our Patron His Highness Sheikh Mohammad bin Mubarak Al Khalifa who has shown the wisdom and the vision to make this revolution possible.

Bahrain can take legitimate pride in being at the top of the United Nations eGovernment List in the Arab Region and for being among the highest performing countries in the world, out ranking many developed countries. I wish to congratulate the Bahrain eGovernment Authority and its leader, my friend, Mr. Al Qaid, for turning His Majesty's vision into a living reality in the most outstanding manner. What has been accomplished in Bahrain in the short span of only a few years can serve as a beacon for others to follow.

It was said in the past that if you want to acquire knowledge, go to China. Today we can proudly say, if you want to learn about eGovernment , come to Bahrain.

So, what can Governments learn from Bahrain? That, they need a broad and clear vision of where they want to go, develop a well- defined and phased strategy, with goals, benchmarks and monitoring mechanisms to carry out the vision and have a sustained commitment for its implementation over time. Strong leadership and a commitment to results are essential to success. The ability to learn from others and from setbacks and challenges and the flexibility to adjust and adapt to the changing environment, without losing the focus on the ultimate objectives, are the other key elements of success. It is not the biggest or the most powerful, but the fastest and the fittest who will do best in this age of rapid technological change.

It is clear, however, that eGovernment is not an end in itself. It is a process and a tool to transform government and governance across the board. The goal of eGovernment should be the pervasive use and applications of ICT in its various forms and manifestations: the internet, mobile, social media, audio-video, radio, television, in all facets of government operations to enable governments to perform more efficiently and effectively become more transparent and open and above all to deliver better and improved services to citizens. This involves the transformation of processes relating to government to employees, government to government, government to business, and, above all, government to citizen relations, including electronic voting and computerized electoral rolls.

Government services to citizens range from basic information about government activities, facts and facilities, to health and education, to welfare and safety, to culture and entertainment, to infrastructure and travel, to driving licenses, building permits and other types of government documents. How can governments deliver these services better to its citizens?

Again, learning from the Bahrain strategy and experience, treating citizens as customers are treated by businesses is the first step. This means that ICT should facilitate easy access to public services, ensuring convenience, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, transparency and openness and an environment free of corruption and influence.

All this and more will need to be built into an eGovernment vision and strategy, but in order for such a strategy to deliver what it promises, it is not enough to commit the resources and motivate government employees and institutions. Real success will only come if the citizens themselves participate, engage and get involved in making the strategy come to life. This implies that citizen must be placed at the front and center of the whole process, starting from the formulation of the vision to the delivery of service. The technologies and tools for doing so are now readily available and are multiplying every day. The greater challenge lies in our own minds and in institutional inertia.

In the end analysis, it is the human factor that makes the difference. What we need is a new way of looking at our human capital. We must not forget that, in the developing world, ours are young societies where immense talent, creativity

and energy are lying fallow to be tapped and turned into creative and productive channels. It would be short-sighted and wasteful not to invest in our young people and not to allow them the opportunities and the space to discover the best productive use of their talents and energy. That path can only imperil our own future. We must learn from those who are wise and fortunate enough to show the way to a better balance between the traditional and the new. We also need to reshape our own thinking and recast our cultural context. The Abu-Ghazaleh Cambridge IT Skills awards, offered in hundreds of centers throughout the Arab world, were developed for that purpose.

The human factor, citizen participation, and their acceptance to change are also important elements in the complete transformation into net-enabled eGovernment operations service delivery.

Opportunities for this change are tremendous, including (1) enabling knowledge-based industries and developing strong ICT sector to support better competitive environment, (2) Increasing knowledge workers through educational opportunities that foster stronger entrepreneurial culture and a growth of indigenous technology enterprises, and (3) Increasing ICT capabilities and skills, therefore an opportunity for the society as a whole to become active participant in the knowledge industry and economy of today. TAGorg will shortly announce TAGIPEDIA, the innovative portal of Arabic Content as a contribution in that direction.

Yet the main challenge remains in the capabilities of the government to keep in pace with the continuous change of technology, services, and content that would require new kinds of tools and internal and external relationships between all elements of the society. With the introduction of the regional concept of e-Infrastructures making available high speed networks, access to resources, content, data, and material become more viable in the educational context of e-Government. Education has become more and more dependent on virtual campuses shifting its role to accommodate life-long learning, online teaching and learning, media-rich course ware, and other kinds of content that will shape new learning environments. Bahrain is seen in a position to leapfrog other more advanced countries in adopting the learner-centric approaches to teaching with more digital tools and resources. The digital life of people has become dependent on the government to facilitate high speed internet access and to provide resources, relevant content, and education tools, which will form the engine for

innovation for society as a whole. In that environment, and for that environment we are launching the university of Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, the corporate, global virtual University of the future.

I admit that all this is not easy to accomplish and it takes determination and dedication to public service to create and carry out such policies and programs. But the path to success begins with the proverbial first step and I am convinced that the eGovernment Conference will make it possible for its participants to have a better understanding of where they are and where do they need to go and enable them not only to take the first, but also the second and many more steps on their own special journey to success.

In closing,

This conference is an opportunity to consolidate our efforts together towards developing a more inclusive knowledge society for a prosperous future our young people. We look forward to developing consensus on regional e-Infrastructures that can facilitate high speed access and to provide resources, relevant content, and education tools, which will form the engine for innovation for society as a whole. ■