



Alignment 2.0: Strategic use of new internet technologies in government

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Web 2.0 strategy
Strategic business alignment
Intervention research

ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the view that strategies for using Web 2.0 should primarily be based upon technological characteristics. The value of the organizational strategic alignment approach for developing specific operational Web 2.0 strategies for government organizations is explored both theoretically and empirically. On the basis of a review of the literature we conclude that there are no a priori reasons why the idea of a fit between IT strategy and business strategic orientation cannot be applied to the development of operational Web 2.0 strategies for government organizations. The empirical exploration based on intervention research at the Dutch Department of Education results in the identification of five configurations: organizational transparency, organizational interactions, policy sector transparency, policy sector interactions and process and policy innovation. These configurations are logically consistent with the strategic orientations of the three directorates of the Department of Education. This overview does not pretend to be exhaustive but validates the idea that an alignment approach leads to differences in operational strategies. The configuration approach provides organizations with useful a starting point for developing their Web 2.0 strategies.

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1. Introduction

The potential of Web 2.0 for transforming government has been highlighted by various authors (Crovitz, 2008; Eggers, 2005) and Obama's presidential election has given these ideas a boost (Green, 2009). However, these ideas seem to suggest a one-size-fits-all approach. Differences between government organizations are ignored and the authors seem to suggest that these differences are irrelevant. Web 2.0 leads the way for all organizations and this technology, they suggest, leads to similar transformations in all organizations. This failure to acknowledge the specific demands of government organizations accounts for many failures in the deployment of new technologies in government (Meijer, Boersma & Wagenaar, 2009).

This paper challenges the view that strategies for using new technologies should primarily be based upon technological characteristics. Gurus highlight the potential of Web 2.0 technologies and imply that these technologies can bring improvements to a wide variety of (governance) practices (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). We emphasize that technological characteristics have an innovative potential but strategic innovation can only be achieved when these characteristics are connected with organizational strategic orientations (Chan, Huff, Barclay, & Copeland, 1997; King, 1978). General strategies often prove to have little value for organizations (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel,

1998). Instead of general patterns of use, specific configurations should guide organizations in the development of web 2.0 strategies. We will argue, both theoretically and empirically, that combinations of organizational strategic orientations and Web 2.0 technology deployment can be categorized in the form of configurations.

This paper aims to bridge the gap between broad visions of Government 2.0 and the specific needs and demands of government organizations. The research focuses on the strategic potential of Web 2.0 for specific government organizations. We will explore whether the organizational strategic alignment approach is useful for developing specific operational Web 2.0 strategies for government organizations (Chan et al., 1997). The explorative research aims to identify different consistent patterns of organizational strategic orientations and Web 2.0 strategies. The question guiding the research is: do government organizations align their operational Web 2.0 strategies with their organizational strategic orientations and is it possible to identify patterns in this alignment? An identification of patterns of organizational strategies is useful for government organizations that are developing these strategies since these patterns can guide organizations to a more fitting strategy than the dominant one-size-fits-all strategy that is propagated by gurus.

Web 2.0 technologies offer opportunities to all of the three different organizations that are central in our research. Each organization has its own strategic orientations. Does this make any difference in the way these organizations think about using the opportunities offered by Web 2.0? And if so, then how does it make a difference? In other words: what role do the specific objectives of

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each of these organizations play in thinking about making use of these opportunities? And in what way does this show? Can patterns be identified in the way organizations relate their organizational strategic orientations to their Web 2.0 strategies?

We aim to expand our knowledge about the relation between organizational strategic orientations and the innovative potential of Web 2.0 technologies. The empirical research consists of workshops with civil servants. The strategic value of Web 2.0 for government is explored through a series of three workshops at different directorates of the Dutch Department of Education. Civil servants were asked to consider opportunities offered by Web 2.0 for attaining the objectives of their directorates. The outputs of these workshops were analyzed to find strategic directions for using Web 2.0 for governance that follow organizational objectives. This research leads to specific insights in the value of a targeted approach to developing a Web 2.0 strategy for government organizations.

2. Developing an operational Web 2.0 strategy

Web 2.0 has grown to be a hype in debates about innovation in governance. “2.0” is a metaphorical indication for the idea that a new generation of internet application has been developed. Tim O’Reilly (2005), widely credited for launching the term “Web 2.0,” defines it as:

The network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an “architecture of participation,” and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences (O’Reilly, 2005).

The basic idea behind the concept “Web 2.0” is that the old generation of unidirectional technologies and passive receivers of information has been replaced by multidirectional applications which make all users into both senders and receivers of information (Frissen et al., 2008; Pascu, Osimo, Ulbrich, Turlea & Burgelman, 2007; Carr, 2008 and, for a more critical discussion, Zimmer, 2008; Jarrett, 2008). The “new” internet is referred to as the participatory or social web: communication in many-to-many networks is a key characteristic of these new technologies. YouTube, Wikipedia and FaceBook are some of the best known examples of Web 2.0 technologies. These applications have become immensely popular and are all based on the idea that content should be provided by the user. Users put films on the internet that can be viewed by other users, they collectively build a new encyclopedia and present their pictures and life stories to each other. ‘User generated content’ is a second key characteristic of Web 2.0. RSS feed and MyGoogle share the idea that information should be adjusted to the needs of the individual. Earlier websites leaned upon the idea of broadcasting since the same information was presented to all users. Newer applications enable users to indicate their personal preferences. Personalization is a third characteristic of Web 2.0.

These three characteristics—many-to-many networks, user-generated content and personalization—have resulted in enormously successful internet initiatives such as RSS, MySpace, Wikipedia, and YouTube (Rapoza, 2006). These initiatives attract large numbers of visitors and participants and dominate the internet. One can raise the question whether these principles of Web 2.0 could also be useful for realizing objectives in the public sector. Could many-to-many networks, user-generated content and personalization strengthen government policies?

New technologies offer new possibilities for governments to realize the dreams they often have had for a long time of becoming more efficient, more transparent, more effective and more responsive. As was the case with the rise of the internet “1.0” some 15 years ago, again with the recent “2.0” developments the expectations of what technologies can mean for government are set high. An illustration of these expectations can be found in the work of Eggers (2005). In his book *Government 2.0* he states that technology can help government to transform itself into a “Citizen-Centered Government” by using technology government can drastically improve the delivery of services to citizens. However, the impact of technologies on government goes much further, he claims. By using technology (and especially web 2.0 technology) it becomes possible to improve education, cut red tape, reduce gridlock and enhance democracy (Eggers, 2005).

The potential may be there but at the same time Eggers (2005) remarks that “Government has been especially slow to realize the full potential of digital technology” (p. 5). This slow pace of adoption of new technologies has also been shown in a study on modernization in Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom by Bekkers and Korteland (2006). In all these countries ICT is put forward as an instrument which can be used to achieve different goals of modernization. These goals include for instance a shift towards self-government, market-governance and self-regulation and an empowerment of citizens which forces public administration to become more responsive and to become more transparent and efficient. The political values these shifts in governance express are efficiency, accountability and liberty. However, based on their research they conclude that the potential of ICT in order to achieve institutional innovation has not been fully acknowledged (Bekkers & Korteland, 2006).

There seems to be a gap between far reaching ideas about the potential of new technologies and the operational realities of government organizations (see also Giarte Research, 2001). This gap calls for an operational strategy, a strategy that connects the potential of new technologies to the specific strategic orientations of government organizations. This type of strategy is based on an assessment of the value of new technologies to strengthen organizational strategies. How can Web 2.0 technologies contribute to the realization of organizational objectives?

Developing an operational Web 2.0 strategy is not straightforward. Bekkers, van Duivenboden and Thaens (2006) have pointed out that government organizations often overestimate the contribution of ICT while at the same time the unintended and indirect consequences of ICT are very often neglected. They also state that the results and effects of ICT are being influenced by the complex and dynamic institutional setting in which it is developed, introduced and used and in which other factors play an important role. Results and effects are the product of the contingent, and thus unique and local, co-evolution of developments in different environments (technological, political, economical and socio-cultural). At the same time, in these environments different stakeholders operate, which try to influence the way in which problems are conceived and solutions are developed and implemented (Bekkers et al., 2006, p. 237). Furthermore, several case studies on ICT-driven innovation show that the social and political embeddedness of the interactions and relationships between relevant actors—organizations and institutions—are important to foster an innovative ICT climate (Bekkers et al., 2006, p. 238).

For government organizations these considerations mean that they have to think about developing a clear strategy to be able to realize the potential benefits offered by Web 2.0 technology. The core characteristics of Web 2.0—many-to-many network, user-generated content and personalization—offer them a potential of becoming more transparent, more efficient and more responsive, but lessons from the past show that it is important to have an eye for the factors that play a

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