

CONVERSATION CASE STUDY

E-identity cards Estonia

Following their return to independence after Soviet Union domination in the early 1990s, Estonia had to build an entirely new system of government and governance. Taking the opportunity in their stride, they tasked a group of experts with developing a digital framework for the public sector.

The new infrastructure was first used to make cabinet documents available online. It then expanded to include the digitisation of tax returns, which improved compliance with tax payments and helped lower tax rates. As demand for online access grew, individual ministries began pushing for their own services to be digitised.

In 2001, to integrate the existing online services, the Estonian government adopted a uniform data exchange platform, X-Road. Today, Estonia is a digital society. One of the 'backbones of the system' is a state-issued digital identity, based on an ID-card and mobile-ID, through which citizens have access to their own individual information and services, from health to their children's grades. Through a citizen portal ('eesti.ee'), they are also able to carry out public functions like updating their residency details and accessing e-prescriptions.

The use of digital identity has also been made available to the private sector as an authentication system for online banking and other services. In addition, anyone in the world can claim Estonian e-Residency, a digital identity that enables foreigners to use the government's digital services and allows companies to run a location-independent business online.

Communication has played the essential role of encouraging citizens to engage with e-governance. "There were strong perceptions of the e-identity symbolising excessive control from government, so we ran communications campaigns educating the public about the practical benefits," says Helin Vaher, the Director of Communications for the Estonian Riigikantselei or Government Office. "But in the end the services speak for themselves. The experience is smooth and helps save time and money. Step by step, trust has grown". As of 2016, over 70% of the country regularly make use of their digital IDs.

While data protection was initially a concern, state of the art security measures through PINs, digital signatures and digital footprints have enabled Estonian citizens to use their online personal identity with ease of mind. "No one can look at data without leaving a record. Transparency standards are built into legislation. Our services are available, they are easy to access, but they are also very secure."



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E-identity cards Estonia continued

While digitising government services may seem a herculean task for countries much larger than Estonia – population size: 1.3 million – the benefits are equally great. The online world provides a cheaper, leaner, faster approach to governance. Through digital footprints, it also improves security, ending data mismanagement and corruption. By creating constant feedback loops, the digitisation of government provides an opportunity to engage with citizens, generating the evidence needed by states to improve service delivery.

Estonia is now continuing its journey of digital-driven citizen engagement by leveraging social media. “It’s just normal communication,” says Ms Vaher. “There should be no difference between how we communicate with family, with friends and with the government.” For example, citizens can now ask questions of the police on social media, and cabinet meetings are live-tweeted, making government decision making transparent and accessible. “Authority is no longer something to be afraid of.”