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BEST PRACTICE IN eAUSTRIA: THE AUSTRIAN ELECTRONIC ECONOMIC CHAMBER PROJECT

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Abstract

In 1994, the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber has started to build an interactive portal on the internet (wko.at). This portal is at the moment one of the greatest information and know-how plattforms in Europe and a combination between eGovernment and eBusiness. More than 300.000 companies have access to an extranet which includes more than 700.000 pages online. More than 1.000 organisations within the Chamber Network and their employees have access to an intranet and upload worldwide their information daily. Around 12.000.000 visitors per month download information in the field of law, business news, statistics and other content like WebTV, or use an eMarketplace. On the international side WKO.at has business information about austrian products in 19 languages online. Online legislative projects as well as administrative procedures and other interactive possibilities are also implemented. The content of WKO.at appears in many other Austrian ePlattforms and is a best practice example of eAustria in eEurope.

Introduction

By definition, e-government is simply the use of information and communications technology, such as the Internet, to improve the processes of government. Thus, e-government is in principle nothing new. Governments were among the first users of computers. But the global proliferation of the Internet, which effectively integrates information and communications technology on the basis of open standards, combined with the movement to reform public administration known as New Public Management, has for good reason generated a new wave of interest in the topic. E-government promises to make government more efficient, responsive, transparent and legitimate and is also creating a rapidly growing market of goods and services, with a variety of new business opportunities.[1]

The Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO) coordinates and represents the interests of the Austrian business community on the national and international level. Membership is compulsory and comprises all Austrian companies (some 300.000 businesses drawn from the areas of trade and crafts, commerce, industry, transportation, tourism, finance, services industries, finance and insurance).

Main tasks and activities are

- representation of membership interests at all levels of government (by law governments are obliged to consult with WKO on legislative projects and important regulation or to involve WKO in decisionmaking and administrative procedures),
- information and advisory service to members (taxation, labour law, vocational training, legislation, advertising, market research),
- economic and international trade promotion/support at the national level (70 field offices around the world).

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[1]Thomas F. Gordon in ERCIM News No. 48, January 2002, www.ercim.org.

Austrian Electronic Economic Chamber

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More than 300.000 companies have access to an extranet (with their own password each company has their own individual and personal homepage) which includes more than 700.000 pages online (also by WAP).

More than 1.000 organisations within the Chamber Network and their employees have access to an intranet and upload worldwide their information daily.

Around 12.000.000 visitors per month download information in the field of law, business news, statistics and other content like WebTV. Important conferences are transferred live to the internet community as well as feered with video conferences.

On the international side WKO.at has business information about every country in the world as well as information about austrian products in 19 languages online.
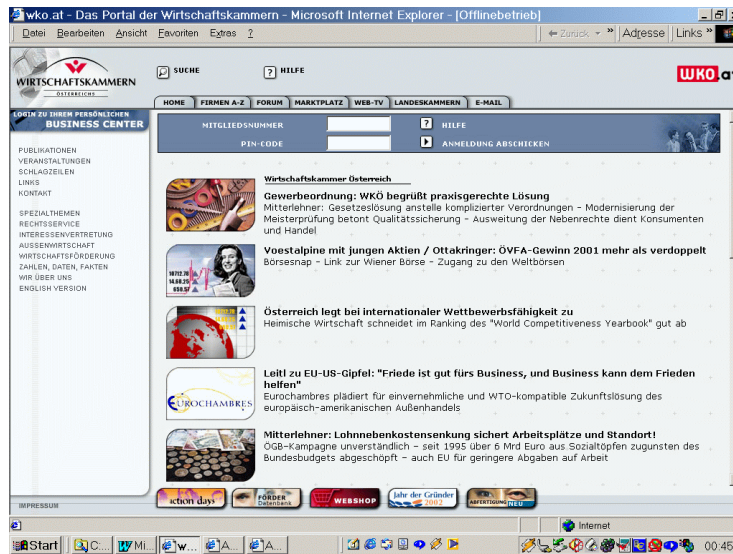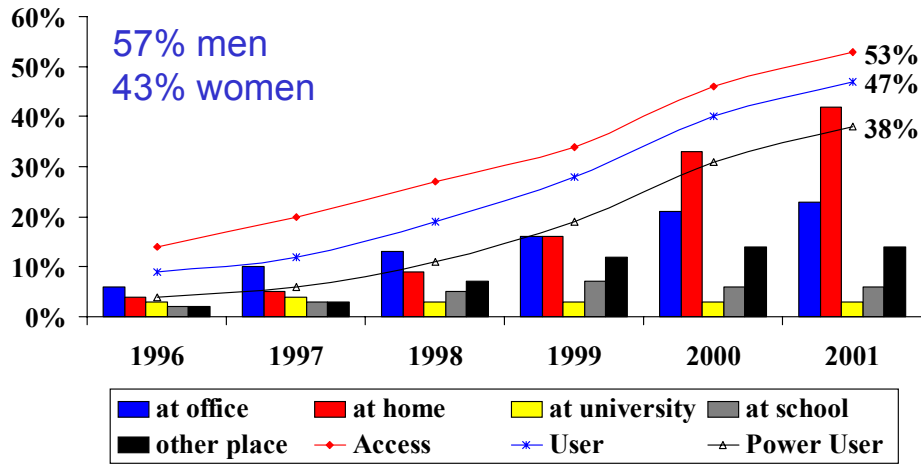

Internet in Austria (Facts and Figures)

At the end of the 4rd Quarter 2001 there are approx. 3.550.000 Internet users in Austria and 84% of the Austrian companies have access to the internet. In the 3rd Quarter 2001 60 % (1996: 36 %) of the Austrian households were equipped with personal computers (approx. 1.920.000) and 92% of the Austrian companies.[2]

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[2]Christian Rupp in Austria Online 2002.

Internet Use in Austria
1996 - 2001

57% men
43% women

Legend: at office, at home, at university, at school, other place, Access, User, Power User

Source: Austrian Internet Monitor in percentage of the austrian population over the age of fourteen

Projects and Examples of eGovernment in eAustria

Web portals can deliver government services with various levels of interaction. Three levels are usually identified: information, communication, and transactions. Information services deliver government information via static web pages and pages generated from databases to citizens, tourists, businesses, associations, public administration, and other government users. Communication services use groupware technology such as e-mail, discussion forums and chat to facilitate dialogue, participation and feedback in planning and policy-making procedures. Transaction services use online forms, workflow and payment systems to allow citizens and business partners to take care of their business with government online. Typical applications of transaction services for citizens include applying for social benefits, registering automobiles, filing changes of address or applying for building permits. For businesses, perhaps the application of greatest current interest is the online procurement of government contracts.[3]

Some Austrian eGovernment applications ate highlighted by the European Commission and honored through their eGovernment Award:

The Administration Gateway of the City of Salzburg (www.stadt-salzburg.at/egovernment) includes e-finance for taxes, e-file for permissions, garaphical information system for digital plans with a lot of layers.

The Public Employment Service Austria (AMS Österreich) offers an eJob-Room service at www.ams.or.at, an interactive service platform for job seekers and employers. At www.jobroom.at they receive support in the labour-matching process. The site's main features include two-way online interaction and full transactions. At www.bewerbungscoach.at the AMS's website offers additional support with the drawing up of CVs and job applications. Also, there are special interest sites for women as 50% of users on www.ams.or.at are female, an info-page on employment for older people and a tool for IT-specialists. The European dimension is ensured by the fact that there is information on work in Austria as well as in Europe (via Eures job search). Occupational and geographical mobility is promoted. The importance of this site is further underlined by the fact that, whereas currently 10% of vacancies are filled via the Internet, this medium's share will rise to up to 25% within the next three to five years.

The Electronic Legal Communication (ELC) is the structured paperless electronic communication between parties and courts and vice versa. ELC (www.datakom.at/erv) is a real substitute of traditional paper communication with the same legal value. It has been developed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Justice in co-operation with the Federal Computing Centre, the Austrian Bar Association and the Datakom Austria. The application exists already since 1990 as a form of communication with parties in

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[3]Brigitte Eichler in ERCIM News No. 48, January 2002, www.ercim.org.

addition and equivalent to paper-communication. After this first step ELC has been made available for the direct import of nearly any kind of document into the database of court automation. Since 1999 the system has also been opened for the communication from courts to parties: now it is also possible to deliver documents from courts to parties. The original restriction to authorised ELC-users (lawyers, notaries, banks, insurance companies etc.) was cancelled in 2000.

The Central Complaint Management (CCM) application records and collects requests, complaints and suggestions of the citizens of Vienna (www.magwien.gv.at) concerning all cases related to the Vienna City Administration (VCA). It facilitates quick and efficient response to the citizens and provides one pool of information for all employees of VCA. The key objectives of the application are the following:

*   Timely and efficient response to the citizens and increased availability of information and service for the citizens
*   Co-ordinated handling of requests and recognition of parallel cases by the system
*   Avoidance of different responses / feedback to the citizens
*   Single point of contact for the citizens and Multi-channel access for the citizens (e.g., emails, telephone, public terminals).
*   Homogeneous structuring of all requests recorded (one case = one file); reduction of processing time
*   Transparency of history of citizen requests.

The application RinderNET (www.rindernet.at) provides online-issue of 'cattle passports' and allows different user access levels providing the most important information on both cattle and holdings: the history of every cattle can be traced to any given date and a complete information on every stock holder is available including reports to the database, available ears tags on holding, status of premium, findings of control-checks and so on. Stock holder data are linked to ear tag information and registration records. Therefore every holding related to a given animal can be accessed quickly and easily. Actually the application manages 13.000 active users (total of 105.000 stock holders) and 1.1 million registrations p.a. (total of 4 million). The number of online registrations increased from 33.000 (in May 2000) to 108.000 (in May 2001) and the number of active users increased from 3.500 (in May 2000) to 12.400 (in May 2001)

Applications by foreign citizens for permission to acquire land in Vienna (www.magwien.gv.at/fremde/auslgrd.htm) are submitted to the Municipal Department by electronic upload. This is usually done by the applicant's legal representative. Once the applicant has proven eligible, the user can complete the necessary forms, which are available on the Internet. Further documents to be submitted with the application (office copies of the land register entry, plan of the estate, sales contract, passport, additional motives or explanations etc.) can be scanned and uploaded as files. Currently some 1,100 applications are processed per year. Given that the service provided in this case takes the form of an administrative permit procedure, there is no way of influencing the number of applications submitted. However, the new system is to be used for the lion's share of all applications to be processed.

WKO.at offers an eMarketplace, eLearning and eConsulting. Many online legislative projects as well as administrative procedures and other interactive possibilities have been started with ministries like „Lets eBiz", „eFIT", „Telefit", „Finance Online" and „Statistic Online". The content of WKO.at appears in many other Austrian ePlattforms like help.gv.at and is also a best practice example of eAustria in eEurope.

HELP (www.help.gv.at) is the national e-government portal of the Austrian government and a platform for all Austrian authorities to support official proceedings. It offers information, interaction and an increasing number of transaction services. HELP was established in 1997 upon the joint initiative of the Federal Ministry of Finance and Telekom Austria AG within the framework of the administration development program. The Federal Computer Centre has been entrusted with the project implementation. The e-government portal HELP is a national platform and a turntable on the Internet for all Austrian authorities to support official proceedings. HELP is strictly customer-oriented and focuses on the individual life situations of citizens (marriage, passport, childbirth etc), on 'life events' of companies, and on all interactions with authorities relevant to these life situations and events. HELP does not pretend to be a 'superauthority', nor does it compete with authorities. Responsibilities for and in official proceedings are not changed by HELP. The unique characteristics of HELP are the combination of its structure according to life situations and its organisational embedding on the highest level – the federal government and the federal ministries.
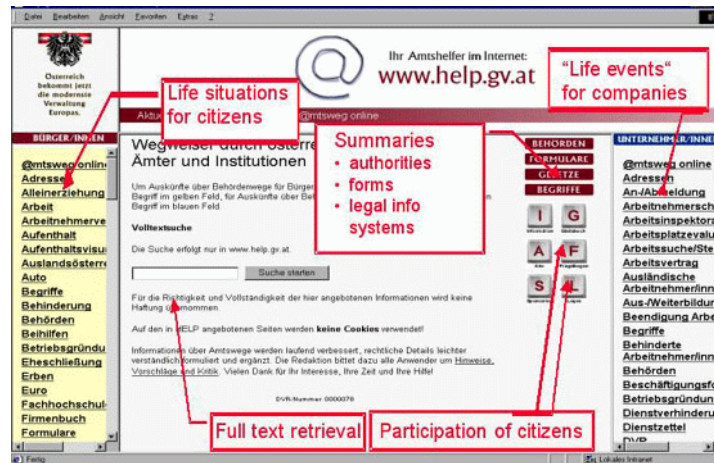
All Austrian authorities are invited to cooperate. The most outstanding development stage of HELP was and still is the possibility for users to handle complex official proceedings via the Internet. In mid-March 2001, a kind of prototype was established to allow users to fill in forms online and send them to HELP.

Five official proceedings with fifteen partners Austria-wide (most of them municipal authorities) are currently supported. 'Virtual administration' is the ultimate goal in the development of HELP. Legal, organisational and technical preconditions have to be established. Processes have to be optimised and organised in a more customer-oriented way. For example, technical prerequisites include the support of electronic payment services, smart cards, and various other devices (eg, mobile phones, personal digital assistants). Once this phase has been reached, citizens will be able, in a single procedure, to handle all dealings with authorities required in a particular life situation. This true 'one-stop government' is the vision of HELP.[4]

Other eGovernment examples in Austria are

- City of Whittlesea - Local gov. Rates Certificate - www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au
- eServices University Linz - www.jku.at
- Central Citizen Request Mgt - www.wien.gv.at/ma55/b-bue.htm
- Self-learning Internet Portal - via.steiermark.at
- Mathe-trainer for children - www.mathe-trainer.com
- Vienna City Administration Entrepreneurial Services - www.wien.gv.at/wgrweb=
- Magistrate of Vienna Location-based Services - www.wien.gv.at/wiengrafik
- Magistrate of Vienna Search for Doctors on electronic map - service.magwien.gv.at
- Statistik Austria eQuestionnaires - www.statistik.at/equest/equest.htm
- Ministry of education School-book ordering - www.schulbuchaktion.at
- Vienna City Library eCataloging & reservations - www.stadtbibliothek.wien.at

Conclusions

The IT world is confrontated with decreasing prices for bandwith and computerpower but with an increasing number of internet users. Technology will loose their importance in comparison with the importance of information. The function of a Chamber Organisation is to strengthen intermediary function and to select value added information. We have to prepare this informtion to guarantee easy access and easy understanding for SMEs. Therefore we need logistic and technology (language processing, agent technology). Our function for the future will be to provide SMEs with functions like digital signature and e-cash systems that they are prepared for the eFuture.

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[4]Christian Rupp in Business Online – eMarketplaces for SME.