December 1997

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INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN JAPANESE LOCAL GOVERNMENT: SIFTING THE DUSTY CORRIDORS

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Studies on computing in government in the US and Europe have revealed that information systems (IS) do not exclusively aim at improving the capability of the organizations in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and information quality. IS also involves applications on improving inter- and intraorganizational interactions, interactions with and among citizens and companies.

Although there is little consensus on the nature of impacts and how to measure it, the direction of impacts of IS is overall positive. By using IS, access to data and the quality of the data as well as productivity and managerial efficiency have improved. That is not to ignore that the overall decision-making processes in the public sector have also been perfected. However, studies also point to the fact that the interaction between different departments, between citizens and government, and between companies and government is not benefitting from IS in an uni-directional positive manner. There are also negative and often mixed impacts deriving from the use of IS.

This research focuses on whether similar findings holds true for computing in Japanese local government. Various studies have pointed to the gap between computerization of the private and governmental sectors in Japan and between the public sector in Japan and the public sector in other first world countries. Furthermore, studies have pointed to the low informatization of the average Japanese household.

Although this is true, computing in Japanese government calls for attention because of the recent, rapid uptake of computerization, a high mix with other communication technologies such as fax, and the importance of the local governments in implementing the NII plans. The overall research objective is to study computing in local government with respect to (1) the nature of IS-use, (2) the impacts of IS on key-organizational variables, and (3) the major challenges faced for the future path of IS use in the Japanese local government.

This research so far shows that the governments have, compared to other first world countries, lower budgets for IS use, a lower penetration rate, and almost no IT use in the communication with citizens, companies, other departments, or inside the organizations. Impacts have accordingly been restricted to conventional IS applications such as word processing, accounting, and taxation applications. The major challenges are developing an inter-/intraorganizational network, an aging staff, transforming the organization to a flatter structure, and changing organizational routines (such as the abolishment of the red seal).

During the spring and summer of 1997, quantitative and qualitative materials on computing in Japanese local government were collected. Quantitatively, this research covers a longitudinal study on computing in the local government for the period from 1986 to 1996. The qualitative data was collected by on-site visits at six local government offices in May and June of 1997. The data on Japanese local government with data previously collected on computing in the US and Scandinavian governments will be presented and compared.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS