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Governing interoperability standards – Network-level decision-making structures and organisational-level intentions for adopting interoperability requirements in inter-organisational e-government projects

Abstract

The strategic deployment of information systems in the public sector (referred to as electronic government, or "e-government") is often seen as both catalyst and means for administrative reform towards "whole-of government" or "joined-up government" structures. Fuelled by the possibilities of ICT for sharing and re-using information across organisations, many public administrations are currently actively engaged in developing the inter-organisational production of electronic public services ("integrated e-service production").

However, integrated e-service production typically requires the partnering organisations to be interoperable, that is, it necessitates the compatibility of their organisational systems in order to operate jointly. Achieving interoperability typically requires adjustments along technical, organisational and semantic lines, within and across organisations. In project contexts that cross-cut horizontal and vertical administrative structures, ensuring the implementation of the necessary adjustment processes across a diversity of organisations is a matter of uncertainty. Consequently, a major concern for public administrations is how to incentivise organisational actors to invest in the required adjustments for interoperability.

This research addresses this concern by focusing on the role of governance structures at the network level for organisations' adoption of interoperability requirements. More precisely, it investigates in a comparative way the implications of decentralised versus centralised decision-making structures for organisations' adoption of interoperability requirements. The main research question thus is: How do decision-making structures at the network level affect the intention of decision-makers at the organisational level to invest in mutual adjustment for the purpose of achieving interoperability? In particular, attention is paid to different contexts of organisational network complexity: In how far do the implications of decision-making structures vary across different contexts of network size and network diversity?

In order to address this question, this research builds on a qualitative research design that rests on two in-depth case studies. Both cases are large-scale projects of inter-organisational production of public services in the Netherlands. Both document analysis and in-depth interviews with top-level decision-makers in the participating organisations are used in order to investigate the question at hand. By contributing a better understanding of the relation of network-level governance structure and organisational-level intention to adopt interoperability requirements, the research thus aims at providing insights relevant to both practitioners working in the field of e-government as well as to scholars interested in the study of network governance and inter-organisational information systems in the public sector.