

Years of Discussion Paying off at ISSS, the Czech Republic's Largest IT-in-Government Event

PERSPECTIVE

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IN THIS PERSPECTIVE

"If you build it, he will come." So goes the line from American baseball movie *Field of Dreams*. Replace "he" with "they" and it applies to the Czech Republic's largest IT-in-government event, Local and Regional Information Society (Internet ve statni sprave a samosprave – ISSS), held this year in Hradec Kralove, April 2–3.

Fifteen years ago, ISSS organizers created the event – and people came. For years, government IT professionals stepped from their silos to discuss how IT can improve both back-end administration and front-end client services. And for years, it appeared that not much was happening. But, below the surface, participants were active; discussions started; professional friendships were created and ideas and plans exchanged. ISSS is now an established and essential networking event for individuals normally isolated in government offices.

All this hidden activity, so to speak, is paying off. This year's event served as a springboard for forward-looking discussions on improving government performance via what might be called foundation technologies such as cloud, digitization, and document management in core areas like ehealth, transportation, and tourism. It also served to announce and launch a project that will make it easier to access government registries and to discuss changes to eprocurement regulations designed to improve efficiency and transparency.

Make no mistake: eGovernment in the Czech Republic has a lot to do to catch up with Western Europe. Many government bodies still have a limited online presence and inadequate backend technologies; ministries, agencies, and offices still work in silos; collaboration and analytics to predict needs and improve services are incipient at best; and a long-term vision for a "smart government" has yet to emerge.

Nevertheless, the discussions and projects reported on at ISSS suggest the Czech Republic is headed in the right direction in terms of government IT development. A little more top-down vision (perhaps presented and work-shopped at the next ISSS) and things could really start taking off.

The Main Event

ISSS has now been running for fifteen years. It regularly draws more than 2,000 attendees, attracts more than 100 private and government exhibitors, and features around 200 presentations. The trend continued this year, with more than 2,200 participants visiting the 110 booths, attending the 200+ presentations and workshops, and meeting professional friends and colleagues.

The opening proceedings included a wide ranging panel discussion with top government officials, including Interior Minister Jan Kubice, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Jaromir Drabek, Senate Vice President Premysl Sobotka, Hradece Kralove Regional Governor Lubomir Franc, Vysocina Regional Governor Jiri Behounek, Statistical Office President Iva Ritschelova, Ministry of Health Director Petr Nosek, and additional high-ranking officials from the ministries of finance, transport, and interior, as well as members of parliament and business leaders at IBM and Ceska sporitelna (bank).

Generally speaking, IT planning and implementation in government bodies in the Czech Republic has been done independently of other bodies. The conversation on stage reflected this lack of coordination, with panelists tactfully expressing reservations about electronic identification systems, development leadership in ehealth records, the continuity of ongoing projects and planning, and the price tags of various initiatives, but frustrations center on several key points about possible future directions. The Ministry of Social Affairs has managed to cut costs and improve operations by moving to a cloud-based model. One MP noted that the Czech Post Office could be an essential player for insourcing services, as well as egovernment services (a position some may find controversial).

The tone of the discussion also reflected several themes that characterized the event:

Aggregation Rather Than integration

The presentation of projects at the two-day event emphasized access points and aggregation rather than integration.

For example, the CzechPoint data aggregation service has proven to be immensely successful. Before it was fully available in 2008 (the pilot started in 2007), citizens, business owners, and visa seekers had to visit up to seven different agencies to obtain documentation for various applications and verifications. CzechPoint accesses the data at those agencies directly; both anecdotal and official reports suggest it has saved citizens a tremendous amount of time.

Partially funded by the European Development Fund, a new registry system builds on the same basic principle. Data stored in multiple locations will now be accessible and editable from single access points by authorized government officials. It is important to note that, just as with CzechPoint, while access is provided to the different databases, data is still maintained in separate databases and administered by

separate government offices. The common gateway through which clerks and the public access information translates requests into the respective formats of the respective systems.

In other words, the current trend is toward the creation of what might be called meta-systems that connect existing systems, rather than the development of a common, or even a single, system for information management. But, while the scope of the project suggests it will run for at least a decade, it is unlikely to push currently siloed government offices toward a common application environment or shared databases.

Efficiency First

Like people, offices often perform best when under pressure. The current austerity zeitgeist and consequent lowered budgets have pushed government bodies to focus on technologies that can improve efficiency and reduce costs.

Digitization and e-administration efforts and provider solutions were thus on full display. The National Archives, the Chamber of Deputies, the government of the Vysocina region, and various registries all reported on efforts to use IT to move toward electronic documentation. An essential aspect of these efforts is using back-end management solutions linked to verification technology (e.g., personal accounts and signatures) to facilitate access and improve overall services.

The day-long ehealth sessions began with a statement of goals from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MPSV). The provision of care was overshadowed by a focus on back-end consolidation. This included using a cloud model to standardize software. It also included standardized services, enhanced user flexibility, increased supplier accountability, and eliminating redundant systems.

While cloud itself has proven invaluable to cost reduction and efficiency gains at the MPSV, it has still gained little purchase in other Czech government organizations. As evidenced in a recent IDC survey on cloud in government, the majority of Czech IT professionals in government do not see cloud as a mechanism for cost control, unlike their counterparts in Hungary and Poland. The sentiment at ISSS seemed to confirm this. Participants with whom IDC spoke see cloud as a viable tool for standardization, scaling, and infrastructure and software delivery, but the enthusiasm associated with the hype in other industries and countries is conspicuously absent.

Mobility Could Be Bigger

While nearly every participant at the event seemed to be carrying a smartphone or tablet and a number of presentations acknowledged that the Czech Republic, along with the rest of the developed world, is undergoing a profound shift from PCs to mobile devices as primary access points for the Internet, government organizations presenting at the event often treated mobility as an add-on rather than something that represents a fundamental change in the way people communicate. Those organizations that emphasized mobility mainly focused on

transportation and tourism, activities now intrinsically linked to mobility. There were a few interesting standouts: The Ministry of Justice has an ejustice program that will include a special app enabling access to records from tablets; the Ministry of Interior focuses on IPv6, which enhances mobility due to auto-configuration of end devices; and the Czech Office for Surveying, Mapping, and Cadastre supports mobile access to its services.

Granted, when it comes to IT, ministries such as the Ministry of Finance are primarily interested in developing their back-end systems. The demands of collecting, tracking, and distributing tax revenue, for instance, are substantial and highly scrutinized and thus receive all of the attention; but it is only a matter of time before citizens start to insist on applications and portals that enable the filing of taxes, payment, and even collecting refunds via mobile device. In the next few years, it will no longer be enough simply to make forms available online. They will also need to be customized for mobile devices.

A Larger Narrative Is Needed

Cost cutting, consolidation, efficiency, and the elimination of redundant systems are all noble goals. The creation and improvement of top-layer services like CzechPoint and ehealth and etourism applications provide genuine value to constituents. eGovernment portals that make finding information and accessing services easier are a citizen's right in the electronic age, and their development should continue.

However, this all needs to be fit into a larger vision. While various Czech government bodies seem to be moving (unevenly) in the right direction, no overarching narrative focuses and contextualizes activity, encourages the breakdown of government silos, or gives both citizens and civil servants a grand sense of purpose. This goes beyond a shared services center or an insourcing unit that can provide infrastructure-, hardware-, software-, platform-, and computing-as-a-service. It must also include business intelligence and predictive analytics to improve services; it must include access points and feedback loops that encourage greater citizen participation in government; and it must include back-end information sharing that enable inter-agency collaboration.

In the above respects, ISSS organizers are in a great position to force the issue. They already have a forum that brings disparate government officials from local, regional, and central offices together. ISSS organizers can structure future agendas and opening ceremonies to spur discussion – and perhaps planning – about what the government and its services should look like in 5 or 10 years' time. Make no mistake: The implementation of such a vision will require exceptional political leadership at the highest level, but, by making this vision an expectation among civil servants and citizens, ISSS organizers can change the discussion and nudge the country toward smart government.

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Related Research

- Cloud Computing for Government: A View from Central and Eastern Europe (IDC Government Insights #CEMA18415)
 - Business Strategy: Smart Government Maturity Model – Open Data and Collaboration in Central and Eastern Europe (IDC Government Insights #CEMA18048, Dec 2011)
 - Vendor Assessment: Top IT Vendors in the Government Sector in Central Europe (IDC Government Insights #CEMA17938, Dec 2011)
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