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How E Can Government Be?

The digitization of state services

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Abstract

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E-government is a trend to offer public services online. A common assumption, at least by governments, is that it not only saves costs and time, but that it eases interaction and puts more decisive power into citizens' hands. Problematic with these arguments is that they are one-sided and disregard the other side of the coin. Customer-orientedness is of major importance, but there must still be someone giving the service. How digital can administration become without disrupting internal work cultures? In the current paper I take a slightly different perspective and turn common customer-orientedness inside out. High reputation and customer satisfaction do not work without the background of a healthy work place and happy staff. Thus, I decided to put myself in the position of a public service employee for some weeks and explore the odds of e-government from the other side. Which effects would digitization have on working behind the scenes? My motivation for this study is not only a lack of focus on the backstage. Public administrations are different. They do not act on a competitive market but provide the backbone and the most vital services to our society. A long-lasting, healthy organization should, therefore, be a desired goal.

The study aims at providing insights into daily practices of public service staff and analyzes possible limitations to digitization. A major theoretical focus lies on discrepancies between ideals and the reality of work culture, the having and doing of an organization and its routines. It seems that these routines are harder to change in public services than anywhere else. The reasons are plenty and safe employment, trust or status protection are just some of the practices I encountered during my journey.

Keywords: E-Government; State Services; Germany; Work Culture; Practice Approach; Habitus; Routines; Trust

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1. Introduction

I am sitting in the office. It is a boring day, as usual, and warm. A colleague of mine is cursing the computer, not the first time today. She mumbles something about having to type in customer data again. The computer has not saved it. I have to smile. Whose fault may this be? Are machines not just as capable as their users? She gets even more upset when someone from the call-center *down there* asks her for help, again. As an administrator at the insurance's IT department she is not amused. Annoyed she tracks the mistake on her screen and her response is not what you may call a warm welcome. As if this was not enough, right before the seemingly afraid caller wants to hang up, she adds another comment to make him aware of the blasphemy of his call. Read the instructions *down there* before calling! Pride in her eyes, confusion in my head, mocking heat. And I wonder, oh beautiful digital world?

The example is supposed to highlight a technology that is commonly called e-government. The extensive application of digital means is a fairly recent trend in public services. We already experience how companies offer unlimited services online. Day and night we buy things on Amazon, bid on Ebay and when we are bored Facebook is always there for us. Governments do not want to miss out on that. Especially the last years have seen a surge of administrations going online. With the emergence of Web 2.0 the digitization of state services has become a top priority. E-government shall involve citizens in decision processes. Customer-orientedness is the buzzword. It is said to be easier, more democratic and less bureaucratic. But is it really?

The scene above is about me, doing a summer job at a public health insurance in Germany. During the long and sometimes boring days I could nothing but notice how e-government significantly affects the work culture. Ironically though, only few studies have been carried out on the effects of digitization in public services. Customers seem a primary concern, without noticing how the promises around e-government can create a gap between vision and realization of unreflective digitization. Is there unlimited potential when human culture needs to be managed? Do we benefit or is technology just a substitute for service? I started to observe the implications of e-government in more detail. And when the chance came to employ this subject in a

professional environment, I took the opportunity to contribute a missing point on the map of hailed digitization.

You may ask why only government and not companies too. Let me remind you of recent discussions about threats of digitization. Governments have stronger awareness of citizen safety and trust than companies. In fact, they are the foundation of society. An escape from their influence is virtually impossible. When I sometimes am in contact with public offices, guess what, I do not like it, but I expect a fast, reliable service. What would I feel when having similar safety concerns as with online communities recently? What if the state went bankrupt and had to close? Companies satisfy a demand. When it is gone, they disappear. Online sale is not essential, functioning governments are. So while companies rely on their staff to adapt to keep the job, governments must always work and so must their employees.

My original idea to study cultural implications and limitations of e-government originated in an internship at the Berlin-based consultancy Public One, which has specialized in dealing with e-government. During several months of work I got to know a diversity of facets of e-government and an impression of the range and focus of studies that have been carried out on the subject. I noticed once more, however, that many of them are lacking a cultural dimension. The internship reminded me of my employment at the insurance during summer. I had already made observations of the cultural dimensions of digital change. In this respect, the first few lines are just one example among many and they suggest that public servants are as human as everyone else. I noticed that e-government is another kind of change, because it essentially alters the way of work. It is also difficult to grasp. It is somewhere out there and far from being understood similarly by everyone. Back to my work at the consultancy, a prolongation of the internship gave me the final impetus to engage in a more extensive study on the subject. It was agreed to avoid unnecessary restrictions and make it an open-ended audit of the situation for employees in digitization. I saw it as a good chance to bring my knowledge back to the consultancy and contribute to a better understanding of cultural aspects of e-government.

It is the deliberate aim and scope of the study to exclude customers and ask *How E can government be* from an employee's perspective. What are limitations to e-government? How much can administrative practices be digitized and to what extent does this affect work culture? Finally, what are particular administrative characteristics and practices which affect the trend and are in turn affected by it? I want to show how different

realities of e-government are created, because there is a potential divergence between vision and reality. The paper shall emphasize this divergence by identifying key visionary aspects, compare them to current work practices and, eventually, analyze underlying patterns which may explain why it is impossible for public servants to infinitely adapt to digitization.

To not leave the reader in open water, the paper starts with a definition of *E-Government & Web 2.0*. Why is this necessary? E-government is not only about internet technologies. Potentially any communication technology is involved. Without spending too much time *The Setting and its Characters* that I encountered throughout the fieldwork are introduced. Due to my limitation to a German context for interviews and a two-month participant observation, the fieldwork material is put into perspective with existing international studies and to gain further insights, even though the German context should be kept in mind. But let us not be restricted to culture. As a reader you may be interested in *The Author's Theoretical Perspective* too. Alongside the well-known dialectic of having and doing e-government, it turns out that power relations strongly influence employees' attitudes and practices. Apart from that, you get to see how routines can impede, but also catalyze digitization. Lastly and due to a focus on cultural practice, it must not be forgotten that e-government is a relative concept, which essentially requires a discussion on the term and its different perceptions.

When it comes to the three main chapters, be advised to approach them like a narrative journey. I begin with a description of pictures and impressions of *The Current State of Public Services* when coming to the field. I give an account of current trends in public services which are subsequently compared to common policies and future goals for digitization as proposed by governments. But be aware that practices are motions. Thus, the pictures are set in motion and *The Doing* comes to the fore. Due to the fact that this study is about finding common denominators in e-government, I highlight five recurring practices. What happens to concepts of trust, responsibility and reward in digitization? How are routines changing or remain unchanged? And how are different realities of e-government created, because different personal backgrounds are applied? The journey comes to a halt by *Making Sense of E-Culture.* The discrepancy between expectations and practices is highlighted once more and conclusions are drawn with respect to how it may be overcome. Four suggestions are made and questions are posed to the policy makers. What does it take to remember staff in e-government developments?

2. E-Government & Web 2.0 – A definition

2.1. E-Government

E-Government, as defined by the English Wikipedia, is "creating a comfortable, transparent and cheap interaction between government and citizens {…}" (E-Government, 2010). It is interesting that the first sentence of an encyclopedic article does not define the very term, but readily assumes its beneficial nature. When you continue to scan for definitions, it is even more interesting to see how different languages, and cultural backgrounds, approach e-government[1]. While Danish, Dutch and German seem to have a very rational approach, the Swedish entry takes a slightly negative stance or, at least, considers those affected by e-government. Otherwise, the Swedish article takes a full approach on customer-orientedness. French, last not least, is business-oriented and focuses on organization management and improvements.

What can be seen from these few examples is that e-government is perceived differently in its respective cultural context. The very notion may generally be equal, but perspectives are diverse. What already comes to the fore as a matter of national differences here, will return in particular contexts concerning public administrations later on too. Coming back to the notion of e-government itself, you may notice that even the word itself allows for a wide range of applications. The Worldbank's official entry – ironically there are only few websites attempting to define e-government and not even the Encyclopædia Britannica has an entry – only describes it as a use of information technologies (The Worldbank Group, 2010). Apart from this statement, a lot is left open when it comes to form, goal or implementation.

From what I could learn during my collaboration with the consultancy Public One though, e-government does have characteristics that should be considered to avoid confusion. Generally speaking, the term comprises every form of electronic communication and, hence, telephone services as well. It should be noted that what counts as electronic communication is not only telephone calls, but also their subsequent processing. The point is important insofar as studies or statistics on e-

[1] All information was rendered by looking at the introductory lines of the Wikipedia entry "E-Government", in the respective language. The languages were selected on the basis of the author's linguistic competences.

government conducted by public administrations, often either include or exclusively focus on telephone services. Obviously, this is worth reflecting on, since telecommunication is far more mature than other technologies within the range of e-government. Currently, most governments do have centralized administrative hotlines or are about to implement them. It was difficult to develop a workable approach from this, because telephones, as opposed to internet, have long been present in work places and homes. Including telephone services, irrespective of their modernity, could have potentially influenced the results, had participants related their private experiences to the new services at work.

I decided to analyze e-government with respect to its effects on work practices and culture in public administrations. This implied that it should not be of vital importance how exactly the terms are defined. The idea was to loosely define e-government on the basis of predetermined expectations, but let the actors freely create their personal range. This procedure seemed more appropriate than to artificially limit a broad and individually experienced notion. During the fieldwork it became visible from the very first moment that many interpretations exist. However, it should be mentioned that direct telephone communication was for the most part excluded by the participants themselves or due to strategic requirements. The latter is based on the fact that internal practices and work culture are the study focus. In this respect, e-government and telephone services were only considered regarding their direct or subsequent internal processes by the help of electronic means. It follows that telecommunication as a common means of customer contact was often excluded. But even the participants appeared to be less aware of telephone services as part of e-government, a most likely reason for its long presence as a common means.

Another factor supporting a broad approach was my close contact and work with the consultancy Public One. Specialized in consulting public clients on e-government, I was aware that it may turn out counterproductive to limit the possible amount of input.

2.2. Web 2.0

Quite the same situation occurred with relatively recent applications of the term Web 2.0 in the context of government services. Web 2.0 is a critical buzzword, which is as often rejected as it is praised. It is generally applied to describe a changed internet use today. While until some years ago it was mostly website providers who put content online,

ready for consumption, every customer can contribute to the contents of a website nowadays. Individual internet accounts abound and the web has become a multidirectional means without administrative guidance. In the context of Government 2.0, the term rather implies a participatory network which capitalizes on the knowledge of its users (Franke, 2009). Government 2.0 is a reality. Several services exist worldwide which employ an interactive approach to involve citizens in decision-making processes. A good example of this is the Unortkataster of the city of Cologne (Hopmann & Initiative “Leitbild Köln 2020”, 2010). Here people can mark undesired places on an interactive map and specify the problem. They can also make suggestions what should be improved in particular areas. The city, in turn, analyzes the requests and solves the problem if possible and necessary.

However, terms like Web 2.0 or Government 2.0 are often criticized for suggesting an internet that is different than before. Frequent and minute arguments over the definitions shall not be discussed any further in this study, because they once more highlight the relativity of the terms. Web 2.0 or Government 2.0 are useful buzzwords and excellent markers for changing governments today.

Lastly, with this study I want to consider Web 2.0 in its cultural context. In the same way as it was discussed for e-government, taking a prescriptive stance is not intended. The actual practices eventually determine how the term is applied in daily processes. In the following descriptions e-government and Web 2.0, in the form of participatory government, are, thus, taken as one and the same. Due to the focus on employee practices, it seems unnecessary to refer to two different notions when both gear for the same goal.

3. The Setting and its Characters

On my way through public administrations I encountered several characters who helped me to understand e-government from the insight. Apart from them, the chapter also presents previous studies which put the experiences into a wider perspective. Owing to the fact that the study is not based on a clear project and was merely supported by the consultancy, I met people in a variety of settings. Two single interviews and a group interview were conducted at a state department. Furthermore, the employment at the

health insurance was extended into a participant observation. Lastly, the original contact with the insurance was established through a person who turned into a key informant throughout the study. He too is introduced on the following pages.

3.1. Previous Studies & Desk Research

The fieldwork took place in various public administrations in Germany. In order to reflect on this cultural context and to contrast it with a larger perspective, it was necessary to conduct additional desk research. Studies from several cultural contexts were subsequently considered, American as well as European and Asian studies, comprising issues like e-government implementation and effects of digital organizational change. Originally, research was also conducted in web forums and blogs. However, no relevant insights were gained.

Even though a major part of the fieldwork material stems from observations and interviews carried out in Germany, the desk research had international range and studies from all major cultural contexts were considered. The German culture and context were, thus, elaborately reflected on in the subsequent analysis. It should also be mentioned that the desk research was mostly conducted after the participant observation but before any interviews and further research were held in Germany. Consequently, both German and international material could respectively be put into perspective.

In particular, seven studies were taken into more elaborate consideration (Bruce, 1999; Leitner, 2006; Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008; Grundén, 2009; Schwester, 2009; Capgemini, 2004; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004). Space does not suffice to introduce them in greater detail, but the major topics shall be mentioned.

Bruce (1999) summarizes a study conducted on information literacy among professionals and identifies seven ways of experiencing it. Although the topic seems unconnected to the current study at first glance, it is, in fact, highly relevant. Prior research had already suggested that a generalized focus on technicalities and IT skills in e-government digitization is beside the point, especially with regard to its cultural implications. The same is mentioned in Leitner's (2006) study on people and skills in European administrations, as well as Tzu-Chuan Chou et al.'s (2008) study on public servants' collective actions in e-government development in Taiwan. All authors

suggest that IT is frequently perceived as a tool rather than a goal, which is why a focus on information literacy seems more promising with regard to analyses on organization and work culture. Grundén's (2009) longitudinal study of a county administration in Sweden hints in the same direction, although she is primarily concerned with analyzing IT competences, the digital divide and coping strategies in Sweden. Schwester (2009), finally, examines barriers to e-government adoption in an American context by looking at different practices that are either successful or unsuccessful.

While these studies rather deal with the cultural and social aspects of e-government and digitization, two more factual reports are taken into account as well. This is done, to add a statistical basis to the material and a quantitative approach with regard to the international proportions of e-government.

Originally, the desk research was supposed to involve web forums and blogs too. A major reason to consider these forms of communication, is the arguably greater display of emotionality than is the case in interviews or other media. It is certainly open to discussion whether blogs are, indeed, more emotional. It may equally well be argued that they are subjective, supporting the creation of anonymous identities, or less subjective, because of a dominant urge for impression management (Hookway, 2008). As things turned out during the initiation phase though, impression management by and large did prevent public services from participation. Even though a blog on e-government was created and promoted heavily as a chance to make anonymous contributions, no comments had been left after more than 2 months. My general impression from the participant observation and interviews indicates that the online environment is not trusted and fear of exposure predominates. The few successful blogs I could find on similar issues were all in steep decline, with hardly any comments being made. It remains open whether this is due to a lack of interest in the topic or an uneasiness to talk about internal matters. Especially in German public services, with their strong focus on confidentiality and safety, it seems likely that this cultural peculiarity has eventually affected participation.

With a final turn to the international studies, it is also necessary to reflect on contrasting cultural contexts. The European Union employs a noticeably unified policy concerning e-government developments. Despite definite cultural differences among European member states, a more or less common institutional cultural conduct can be assumed – surfacing in the studies presented by Leitner, Grundén and Capgemini. To contrast the European similarities more analyses were chosen from Australia (Bruce,

1999), Taiwan (Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008), the USA (Schwester, 2009) and Thailand (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004). As will be seen later, especially the study from Taiwan provides a strong impetus for reflection on contrasting cultural habits. Having the socio-cultural differences in mind, it will be interesting to see for the reader that administrative practices in the Asian countries do not necessarily diverge from classical Western culture. While Western countries are mostly associated with individualism and Asian countries with their intense collectivism, the resulting tensions in government digitization are surprisingly often alike.

The example, to which I will come back later, is a clear point in case that early assumptions can turn out to be prejudicial and require further desk research. Cultural context does influence an author's results. But at the same time it needs to be understood that a direct experience of different cultures through a fieldwork alone is close to impossible. Reflective material is, hence, a vital contribution to expand the German perspective. Lastly, the key objective of the study must not be forgotten. Differences and cultural peculiarities are less in the focus than it is the search for common denominators.

3.2. 2-Month Participant Observation

The incentive for an extensive participant observation was an uneventful summer in 2009. I remembered a distant contact in a public health insurance and asked him whether they had any job vacancies. At that time it was rather accidental that he gave me a positive response, so I moved back to Germany on short notice and started working at the IT department, in particular the section for testing, implementing and training new software. During the two months of work a lot changed, when I came to notice how employees struggle with an ever-increasing presence of technology and e-government. The employment slowly turned into a participant observation.

To begin with, public insurances play a vital part in Germany's health system and aforesaid insurance is one of the biggest in the country. However, due to the political system, public and private health insurances are essentially in competition, even though their cultures are dramatically different. Employees in the public insurance seem quite relaxed when talking about issues like job safety, but at the same, there is a certain uneasiness and stress about all the little things that occur in daily life.

Hierarchies are stiff, communication is rigid and follows rather bureaucratic rules, staff is everything but easy-going, processes take time. Somehow it is all you expect from a German administration. But one should not be disregardful of the good sides. Forms do go their way, procedures are save and confidential, everything follows a very reliable timetable.

However, at the time of my observation, the insurance was undergoing two major changes. It was about to rationalize its administration by merging with its sister insurance in another state. While the insurance was merging, it also introduced a new digital processing system for a better handling of customer data – to be fair we should say the system was already introduced but not fully integrated yet. The reorganization involved a great adaptive effort by the employees. Many people had to change their workplaces, but not because they were being fired – in fact, firing in the public sector is rather difficult in Germany. It was stressful, because they were being shifted to new positions, getting new tasks and, at the same time, had to arrange with new software. What bothered the people *down here* most though, was the fact that new hierarchies were created. Obviously staff was not the only one keeping its jobs. Boards and managers of both insurances were equally concerned with keeping the status quo of their salaries and settle, if possible, in a comfortable position. But as stress levels were coming back to normal again, it became clear that it was the new technology that bothered most. Change was on its way and the fear of leaving old habits was all-pervasive.

The situation was excellent for doing research on the cultural effects of organizational change. Not only was a new system about to be integrated, it was also its constellation. While the usual focus during organizational changes is on emphasizing customers' needs, in this case customers were no issue at all. Jobs were save and the German law, which requires every citizen to have a health insurance, made sure that no customers were being lost. It was a great chance to observe e-government and its effects on work culture from a purely organizational perspective. Everyone's eyes were turned inside. So even though I was employed to help facilitating the change process, I took the lucky coincidence of being situated in the IT department and short-handedly turned into a participant observer.

Concerning ethical considerations, the sudden change posed minor problems. In line with Davies (2002), full informed consent should have been built. But as an active member of staff and observer at the same time, I also had to maintain a

good atmosphere in an office with four other employees, one of them the team leader. Otherwise, loss of results and trust could have caused serious damages. The research, hence, had to be partially covered. In order to still provide as much information as possible, I informed the staff about my general profession and interest in their work culture and practices. Luckily, the staff did not object.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to reflect on the fact of being an intruder for the further descriptions. In a public German insurance, with its strong hierarchies and relatively fixed orders, trust is a major issue. Even though the team had no problems with the observations, it was more advantageous to keep the study deliberately out of conversations. It follows that methodological sacrifice had to be made concerning the dilemma between observing and participating (Davies, 2002). Trust was eventually more important for the overall success and it was decided to sacrifice neutrality and precision during the observation when required. Notes were taken in the evenings and with a delay of several hours. Interestingly, the staff still repeatedly turned to me to discuss my impressions of the new computer system and expanding hierarchy. It became obvious that I was still an outsider who could contribute an external perspective. Despite all attempts to be reflectively neutral, the delayed note taking inevitably caused experience, tacit knowledge and interpretation to merge occasionally (Wolfinger, 2002). The set-up obstructed an independent observation, complete openness and time for reflective conceptualization, as suggested by Tjora (2006). It was tried to diminish the effects of delayed field notes by applying Tjora's recommendation to take separate notes on neutral and subjective impressions during the interviews and observation. The procedure I hope has minimized possible distortions.

A last point shall be made with respect to the workplace itself. Being employed in the IT department, a sense of pride was preeminent. The top management's vision of a future with e-government, actively embodied in the new software, made the IT staff responsible forerunners of change. A powerful position was created. From an observer's point of view it may be argued, though, that working in the IT department was also a limitation, because digitization was dealt with every day. I object that this is only partly true, as advantages and disadvantages occurred. The department was just as responsible for counseling and training, making it a place where many conflicts surfaced when different perspectives met and clashed. Yet, on a general level this is the case for any observation where compromises have to be made between profound insights in one area and random samples in others.

3.3. Key Informant Klaus[2]

Without Klaus, this study would have been almost impossible. Klaus is a distant contact who arranged the employment at the health insurance. He has been employed in the insurance for many years and has established extensive contacts in all departments. Apart from arranging the employment, he was also a key interview partner and gave valuable insights into the workings of a typical administration.

Klaus is in his middle ages and has been with the company for almost twenty years. Currently, he works as a controller. He is not completely satisfied with his position. Typing in numbers every day seems dull and statistics do not appeal to his wish to be more creative. Vividly he describes how annoying it can be to gather statistics from other departments, how everyone reinforces their subjective importance. The fact that Klaus is not the best communicator adds to his dissatisfaction. I may even say he is too nice and so it seems even more tormenting to communicate with other people. Often, he says, departmental stubbornness would simply be caused by everyone's fear to loose a tiny part of competence so that everyone claws at whoever comes along. Klaus' arguably shy nature also surfaces when he has to deal with the new software. Part of his work is to test run the software and identify possible errors, even though he is not a technical expert. A long time he had happily done paper work and had not interfered with innovative projects. Of course, he has always been able to work with all these office programs, but he repeatedly made sure to tell me that digital processes are outside his favorite realm. Even at home he mostly stays away from computers, likes it quiet and only does what is essential for the job.

Apart from his current position and attitudes though, the employment in a public administration for almost twenty years brings about key advantages for my study. Public services in Germany are known for their consistency. They rarely fire staff, especially with increasing duration of employment, and rather educate or move staff around. Klaus has, thus, basically worked in every position, starting as a call-center agent, more elaborate customer services and contracting up to higher administrative occupations in the past decade. His background, consequently, renders a lot of insights and information about the particular work practices and culture. Klaus is basically familiar with all the tricks and whenever we talked about other people, he could relate to

[2] The name Klaus as well as several possibly identifying features are invented for reasons of anonymity.

their perspectives. Our informal discussions often circled around the attitudes of other employees. Needless to say that these had to be reflected on with respect to Klaus' subjective thoughts. The fact that Klaus was employed in the same insurance as my place of observation, created a fruitful combination and vital diversity of opinions about the company's internal changes. Throughout the study Klaus took on more than one role, as he was repeatedly and informally interviewed too. What is of special interest, in this regard, is that Klaus was still quite new and inexperienced in his new position during our time of contact. He struggled with software tests and when it came to optimizing service systems and his lack of IT skills was obvious. However, because IT skills play a somewhat critical role in e-government, this friction provided plenty of material.

At this point I would like to spend some words on how I approached his role technically. The interviews with Klaus stretched over a time of three months. Their set up rather resembled free conversations. Due to this, and keeping in mind his subjective perspective when describing other employees' opinions, I often tried to play a game of question and answer and negotiate opinions (Davies, 2002). Conversations were discussions and deliberate reflections at the same time. Our negotiations were essential to balance advantages and disadvantages of his position. Naturally, his profound knowledge of the organization was also disadvantageous. His persona is a typical example of someone being dominated by the history he has acquired in the company. He has obviously developed a strong habitus about how things should be. During our conversations he was often unaware of why perspectives differed (Bourdieu, 1993). The saturation with his life history in the company, good and bad experiences, needed elaborate reflection (Davies, 2002).

Concerning the confidentiality of our contact, quite the same solution needed to be found as with the participant observation. Once more it seemed impossible to be fully transparent and, at the same time, guarantee good research results.

3.4 Interviews at a State Department

During the fieldwork the supporting consultancy offered an opportunity to interview several people from a ministerial department of one of the German *Bundesländer*[3]. Eventually only two employees from the department of economy and technology were willing to take part in the study. Because many of the previous ethical considerations and reflective methods apply for these interviews as well, I exclude those explanations and focus on the characters.

The two ministerial employees are both employed in the state department of economy and technology of one of the sixteen *Bundesländer*. Their daily work is quite similar and both feel to have a quite fulfilling occupation. In particular, they are concerned with funding requests by new companies or those who have new ideas for the future development of the *Bundesland*. The two lively characters, a man and a woman around the age of forty-five to fifty, were very eager to give insights into their work and opinions on e-government. In fact, it was hard at times to follow their comments in our group discussion, due to their urge to speak out. Unfortunately, the political setting, guidelines of strong confidentiality with respect to inside information and their personal opinions prevented any recording of the contact. Neither did they want any detailed information about their positions made public.

Despite working in a different kind of public service, it was interesting for me to see how similar the organizational set up was to the health insurance. Upon entering the department, I was surrounded by an atmosphere of gray walls and shockingly clean floors. Indeed, it was difficult to get into the building, because I arrived about one minute after our appointment in the afternoon and the main entrance had already been locked. Luckily someone walked past the door and hesitatingly opened. As a German I am used to following hieroglyphic, numerical directions and so it took only few minutes to find the way to their offices. I was met with an aura of suspicion, common for those departments, and passers-by clearly indicated a sense of not belonging. It was arguably the age that made a difference too. However, surprise set in when I approached my first interview partner. Her office was bright and disorderly furnished. Just as her persona, everything felt so much different from the gray walls outside. Even though she was slightly reserved in the beginning, she quickly put on a

[3] A *Bundesland* can be compared to what is usually called a state in, e.g., the United States. The *Bundesland* is part of the federalist political system in Germany. While the *Bundesländer* have several individual rights, such as determining the model of education, a larger part of political governance remains in the hands of the country.

certain easiness which she described as common in the department. I attributed the optimism to her leading position which may have given her greater security and professionalism. Nevertheless, it seemed common to have short conversations in the corridor and maintain close contact, a flat hierarchy and familiarity in the department.

We were in the midst of the interview when she spontaneously invited another colleague to the discussion after fifteen minutes. The interview suddenly turned into a group discussion that needed no extra energy to keep going. The issues I raised were fervently discussed among the two. Ironically, it was hard to stop them. The second interviewee was even more lively and when the first had to leave, he readily agreed to conduct another interview in his office. This second interview should turn out to be a long-lasting discussion. Both being dedicated to their jobs, it was especially him who had worked in many positions of the department. In effect, he had acquired a vast range of experience and the office reflected his history in the administration. Many project posters hang on the walls, many of them outdated. He was eager to explain them and his current and past projects. The desk was scattered with papers and I noticed that the computer was switched completely off. As I figured out after some minutes of conversation, the papers even had an order and it was interesting to see how much he related to the material in his room. Later on the reader will see that this also reflected a sense of urgency to communicate his opinions.

What was most striking during the visit was the apparent reason why flat hierarchies and a good atmosphere are maintained in this department, and many other administrations that I encountered. Closed off from change and competition, many employees are quite old and have stayed with their respective department for many years. Naturally, work routines have evolved, but also routines of familiarity. While these routines are often considered harmful to major changes, they also embody effectiveness and immense knowledge (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010), an advantage that may not so readily be discarded.

4. The Author's Theoretical Perspective - applied concepts

Having material and presenting it neutrally is desirable, but unrealistic. You cannot cross a junction from all sides at the same time. Without any intention to limit the reader's take on the study, I still would like to bring forward certain of the applied theoretical tools to make sense of the fieldwork material and help to understand public work culture. In case the reader wonders why these concepts are introduced at this point. As the concepts often blend with later descriptions, you shall already get an idea of my analytical filter and avoid lengthy interruptions later on.

4.1. Einstein was right – everything is relative

As a reader you may ask what Einstein has to do with cultural analysis. In the present context, Einstein's famous quote, indeed, serves pretty well to understand key practices in the office. When looking at relativity outside physics, the concept has been discussed widely in social sciences too. Especially in cultural analysis relativity recurs when reflectivity is employed with regard to the individuality of life-modes, habits etc. I, therefore, come back to Einstein's concept in my analysis of the fieldwork material.

An artifact, issue or situation is inevitably seen from different perspectives. When talking about cultural instead of physical perspectives, a basic assumption is that individual mental concepts, attitudes and experiences must always be considered. On whatever scale, relative standpoints can theoretically be broken down into infinite parts. Annemarie Mol's account of interpretative differences of medical diseases is a vivid example of what this relativity can imply culturally (Mol, 2002). She explains how a disease can be tracked either rationally, under a microscope, or clinically by a doctor evaluating a patient's symptoms (Mol, 2002). Usually, the disease is then extracted from both and merged into a single entity, while the different practices themselves are ignored. This is unproblematic as long as it does not clash and the patient dies (Mol, 2002). Mol discusses this divide of the same object into different realities with regard to how it is practiced. The same can be seen in the following chapters. E-Government

implementation is a vast construct and is perceived and lived very differently on different levels of the organization. Apparently, for Klaus e-government has other implications than for a top manager. While the former is mostly concerned with the computer in front of him, the latter thinks of trends, politics and balance sheets.

In particular, I approached these internal processes with what may be called a phenomenographic eye (Marton, 1994). As phenomenography attempts to account for all possible perspectives on an issue, it was tried to identify major positions and interpretations regarding e-government. Major concepts during my observations turned out to be, for instance, different levels of information literacy (also discussed in Bruce, 1999, and Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008). In fact, on my whole journey through public services misunderstandings almost always emerged from differing perspectives. What may sound simple on paper appeared in a multitude of shades. It underlines how important it is to let oneself go and understand all possible realities, no matter how misguided they seem, instead of putting one notion of e-government as fact.

Because of the wealth of material there were no initial hints where to start. Only with time it turned out that the actual chaos of information was crucial information in itself. As a consequence, Mol's approach frequently found its way into the analysis.

4.2. "It's not what you know, it's what you can do."

The sentence is a famous expression in cultural analysis. In the widest sense, it refers to the main approach of this study, namely that of analyzing actual practices. Two possible meanings are applied. On the one hand, I want to look at how meaning is negotiated in the process. How does someone like Klaus shape e-government through his individual practice and how are his character and practice shaped in turn? How does e-government visualize in his tasks as a controller? On the other hand, practice is taken less literally and with regard to the divergence between vision and reality. Even though both aspects revolve around the same issue, of course, it is tried to look at it from two perspectives.

The first approach largely draws on concepts of how material shapes and changes practice, but also how it is practiced in use (Shove et al., 2007). To clarify the point, let me take the example of photography (Shove et al., 2007). In earlier times, slow cameras and longer development time essentially made photography an elite practice. Great efforts were necessary to take them. Taking photographs was saved for

special moments and executed with great care. With the invention of digital photography and modern cell phones all this has changed. Time has become superfluous, photos are shot or edited at any time and nothing is wasted. Literally everyone has become a photographer. But it must not be forgotten that our new habits also shape where photography will go. The wider introduction of e-government is a similar process. My question is whether changes manifest in a similar way. Does e-government become Klaus' new digital camera or will it remain an old camera, rejected by the staff or applied only with great care by a few selected and skilled IT experts?

The second perspective on practice concerns the dialectic of having and doing, expectation and reality (Miller, 2001; see also Czarniawska, 2002, on the dialectic between organization and organizing). The daily "doing" is in the focus once more. This time though, it is about to see how intentions are realized when put into actual practice. Let me attempt to draw on Shove et al. and their story about how people imagine their new kitchens in contrast to how they are used (2007). Shove et al. assume three possible ways of *doing* a kitchen – with material and doing in synchronization and no changes needed, with a focus on the "having" or lack of material while the future practice is imagined, and a focus on "doing" which is altered through a new way of practicing available material. The question with regard to this example is whether this is applicable for e-government as well. Why not try to observe whether my interview partners' vision of e-government can be synchronized or diverges from actual practices? What if old habits and routines interfere? Furthermore, the dialectic begs the analytical question how an office narrative created around internet communication trends and the top management's praise of e-government is experienced in the office itself. What is the difference between a created societal image and its use (Miller, 2001)?

The practice approach leads to yet another concept, explained in the next chapter. The cultural notion of power seems to lie at the heart of many problems with change processes at work. In combination with having versus doing, Czarniawska (2002) hints at how established routines, a power aspect in organizations, hinders doing new things in new ways. Reframing one's routine acts, in our case most likely to be caused by new digitized processes, is often unsuccessful, because it is approached from within these old frames of routine. This view on power and practice in changing work environments is an interesting background against which employees' descriptions can be evaluated.

4.3. Power

I experienced power, subject of much of Foucault's work (2000), as a key determinant in the routines and hierarchies of public services. When it comes to customers, power is often a matter of security concerns over their personal data. With e-government this power relation may change, when decisive power is rearranged and put it into the hands of citizens. In the following chapters it is the idea to see whether the same applies for power struggles in organizations. While routines, pride about one's competence and fear of change seem to exert most power, it will also be interesting to see that concerns about how our personal data is administered are an issue right within public organizations too.

Owing to the latter point, Klaus' and the other servants' practices shall be approached from a perspective of anti-authority struggles (Foucault, 2000). The idea is to tackle power not by how it is exerted, but how it is resisted (Foucault, 2000). Frequent concerns among citizens about exaggerated state control, are one such example. As the reader will see in later chapters, technology may have become an authoritative force controlling work and competences in times of thriving e-government.

Foucault argues that power mechanisms are best analyzed in competitive companies (Foucault, 2000). In this regard, it is highly interesting to take the concept and consider it in terms of the paradox of the public sector (Czarniawska, 2002). Other than companies, the public sector is less competitive and hardly any self-preserving mechanisms exist, because it cannot go bankrupt. Why not use this unique constellation and consider power right within e-government practices? Digitization is a trend in modernization and competitiveness that may be perceived as necessary by higher management levels. The basic question is though, how this reflects in the daily work of an average public servant. And how is the need for change justified in a complex web of gaining competences while loosing others?

4.4. Fashionable e-government

What if I was provocative for a moment and would say that e-government is just a temporary hype and pure fashion? Is it really a matter of pure efficiency or is it an urge to keep up with current trends? In fact, some interviews led me to think that both are

possibly true. The problem with fashion is twofold (Czarniawska, 2002), as it is not necessarily progressive and also has the tendency to annihilate itself.

Looking at the former, a second concept – the metaphor of dictionaries and translation (Czarniawska, 2002) – can be involved. So why then is fashion not progressive? As in the clothing industry, following current trends can blind public services to see the limitations of digitization. It often occurs that the produced image does not correlate with the image in use (Czarniawska, 2002). Even though governments largely provide services just as companies, there is a translation gap and a hype around something that cannot simply be translated into every context. The sometimes dull but quite effective German bureaucracy is not comparable to a private sector under pressure to perform well. In subsequent chapters I attempt to apply the idea of e-government as fashion to see through the divergence of having and doing. The intention is to place the perceived daily practices into the right perspective against the common image. It is like a translation of books. You must always ask yourself whether you are proficient enough to translate an American joke into German. Will they understand? So how viable is it to translate successful digitization in the private sector into public sector bureaucracy? A full conversion is impossible.

As second possibility is that e-government could, just as fashion, simply become outdated at some point. Whatever is fashionable is also marked “special”. But the more people copy it the more it looses its attractiveness (Czarniawska, 2002). When and to what extent does e-government loose its charm? What are the effects when it suddenly becomes normality and cannot be used for branding a distinctively innovative administration anymore? Many employees I have met already utter concerns about the blindness with which a trendy model is introduced without reflections about its appropriateness. The next chapters are going to elaborate on this missing translation.

4.5. Habitus, routines and trust

What prevents bureaucracies from being innovative is not only their strong hierarchies and power relations. I assume, more than anything we are all familiar with the amazing stiffness of public services. Nothing seems harder than to change the routines of public servants. One reason for this may be the strong habitus which staff members develop in the mills of bureaucratic hierarchies over time (Bourdieu, 1993). Klaus is just one example and his history in the insurance plays a major part in upcoming chapters.

In simple terms Bourdieu's habitus can be understood as our past experience and life history. It often is a subconscious force, determining present decisions and behavior by mediating past experiences (Bourdieu, 1993). Actions happen in and are influenced by the present context, but they are also shaped by our past identity. Past and present are connected. Looking at habitus is, thus, an excellent tool to analyze in how far an individual's work history frames current routines and opinions on e-government. But what is more, habitus also a fundamental aspect of the production of group consensus (Bourdieu 1993). Apart from influencing individual decisions, people use their life history to negotiate between themselves and the network around them. Does this also mean it induces group pressure and resistance to digitization processes? In many popular narratives public administrations are models for resistance to modernity, specifically because routines are so ingrained in them. "That's how we've always done it here, that's how it works". Is that not a commonly expected expression?

Group consensus and negotiated identity imply a very important aspect in organization culture, namely trust. Frykman et al. (2009) have conducted a very interesting study in the public sector that deals with ideas worth to be considered in the present analysis. Their study is about identifying reasons for varying sick leave figures in two Swedish counties. One county and its inhabitants seem to have a rather entrepreneurial attitude. To make do with life's situations and carve out an individual living is an accepted behavior. Integration is a matter of showing active participation and acceptance of these rules. The health care institutions are strict, sticking to the rules of bureaucracy. The other county stands in sharp contrast. Here people rely on the health care system as a means of overcoming seasonal job shortages. Integration is a matter of time and not simply following the game. People have to grow into society over time.

What would happen if these two settings and their different concepts of trust were taken and transferred into an organizational context? While the first would be a company, with all its competitive and entrepreneurial characteristics, the second may very well be compared to a public health insurance, where people have a secure financial basis and safe jobs. But what happens to the concept of trust (Frykman et al., 2009)? The company is in need for clear and strict rules, in order to get it right. Trust in oneself or the group is a key for success, because the company does not guarantee safety. The insurance, on the other hand, it seems securely funded and job loss is only a distant fear – a reality at least in Germany and some other European countries.

During my journey through public services I repeatedly tried to figure out how trust may surface in an administration's safety net. How do routines and trust work with respect to e-government in an uncompetitive environment? For the analysis it was interesting to see how this translation into a bureaucratic context would work. Especially with regard to daily practices of e-government a concept of trust or mistrust in technology might give a profound picture of how work culture is affected.

5. The Current State of Public Services

The days during the fieldwork felt like a journey. From the beginning, my plan was to remain a strong awareness of all these plentiful visions surrounding digitization. Still I wanted to approach e-government pragmatically. Daily practices, the tiny struggles of everyday bureaucracy were of interest to me and I was in search of a better understanding what could possibly go wrong within these processes. The following chapters reflect on this journey in the form of a narrative. Imagine the upcoming chapter to be a picture that is not yet set in motion. What are the first impressions when coming to the field, the? What is the immediate reaction to the picture of public services and e-government? My idea is to present a sense of "what". What appealed to the eye at first sight? As a reader you may struggle with the image, but let yourself be postponed. Visions are always the first part of a journey. Only in hindsight you may realize a divergence with reality.

5.1. "A series of disconnected islands"

The quote was coined at a workshop about implementations of e-government held in Bangkok (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004). In a way it would just be as likely to stem from the German health insurance or the state department. It was striking to see how similar different services are in creating the same archipelago of bureaucracy.

However, context is once more important here. The fieldwork was mainly conducted in Germany, a country not necessarily associated with flexible structures. Even though the

abounding German bureaucracy has its reasons, it must not automatically be interpreted negatively. I was hasty myself in attributing specific results to Germanness, when I noticed that at least in European administrations the picture is to varying degrees the same.

But what exactly is this archipelago? The bright vision in many publications on e-government is to break up old hierarchies and let digital communication lead the way towards cross-departmental team work (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004). Flexibility is a key term on an increasingly competitive market. My first impression at the health insurance was that this is, in fact, continually being realized in public administrations. Liveliness was all around me, people working faster than normal, taking on more tasks, doing extra hours etc. The supervision by the bosses was more intense and an atmosphere of doing it better this time was all-pervasive. The necessity for an economic performance was virtually embodied the set up around me. The merger of the two insurances and the introduction of more and better software allowed no mistakes. It is in these situations that team work and better communication are frequently recommended in management models (for example in what is sometimes regarded as the bible of innovation management, by Tidd et al., 2005).

But the success of those models sometimes seems no more than a distant mirage. Despite the intense work atmosphere around me, old routines seemed still abundant. Hierarchies saturated the air whenever a manager entered the room. Departments were eager to maintain their status. My introduction into the new software and work routines was lengthy. The formality of it all created a feeling of pressure – do not click on this button if you are not sure, do not ask this person but the other one first. Quite the same impression emerged at the state department. When asked about why old behaviors seemed to persist despite all political agendas promoting flexibility, the answers were somewhat paradox. The employees were not aware of a necessity to change or behave economically efficient. On a general level, this is not only true for the insurance but for large parts of the state department too. While I come to a more deliberate description of this issue in the next chapter, it shall suffice for now to mention that the economic efficiency of e-government is not necessarily proficient in daily administrative practices. A typical divergence of having and doing e-government emerges and it will be seen where in daily practice reasons for such behavior can be found.

Quite the same seems to happen with recurring visions of a better inter-departmental communication. Apart from a few exceptions, the international studies show that this is more than a typically German phenomenon. Communication seems to happen in the same fixed channels, if not to an even larger extent. Why is this the case? The observation is once more paradox, because visions of team work, improved communication and a flexible work environment are, indeed, being constantly set in place successfully. The workshop held in Bangkok indicates reasons for this dilemma (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004) and is supported by remarks made by key informant Klaus as well as the two lively interviewees. What I first interpreted in terms of new communication and work structures seemed misguided. The people essentially remained unchanged and who can blame them? With a mere vision being put into an old bureaucratic setting without broader attempts to implement change, the result was a reinforcement of the status quo. Instead of merry people communicating cross-divisionally, departments were eager to stay autonomous, making it even harder to access relevant information. It occurred to me that here the dream of a flexible, responsible individual with dedication to his or her team has been taken literally and, thus, too far. On a general level increasing communication has been sacrificed for the good of protecting team and individual competences. Has a reality paradox evolved? The situation at hand shall be of vital importance for upcoming chapters and hopefully sheds some light on how daily practices strengthen a dialectic which is supposed to be eliminated.

5.2. Trendy ICT

Fashion is a term usually associated with clothes and lifestyle. Czarniawska (2002) shows that fashion can also be a concept of social behavior. In the present study it appears that fashion is an issue on more than one level, just as the problem of translation.

An immediate impression in both the state department and the insurance was how e-government seems to have become something of a trend. Departments look at each other and try to copy innovativeness. Consulting reports frequently reinforce this trend by generalizing and promoting the positive aspects of digitization (such as Capgemini, 2004). Obviously, these reports must always be considered with regard to their political setting and the results they are supposed to produce. Nevertheless, it

cannot be denied that a sense of urgency to follow leading models held sway of the people during my observations. Is this surprising? Not really, because e-government is without a doubt beneficial. It is not my intention to argue on the negative aspects of digitization alone, but to take an unprejudiced look and understand what is happening when the bright lights are turned off. Still it is hard to deny an excitement on part of the insurance' top management in following current trends without considering their cultural fit. This pattern came to the fore from the first moment I entered public administrations. Even though e-government was by and large supported by everyone, in almost every instant an obvious gap could be sensed between idea and application. Questions of "how" and "how to do it in this case" permeated the interviewees facial expressions.

Yet, it was not only the fact of employing a new, fashionable practice that filled the atmosphere during my research period. The urge of being different lies at the very heart of fashion too. In this regard, it is ironic that different applications of identity and alterity surfaced stronlgy (Czarniawska, 2002). Whether during the interviews, the observation or the desk research, being different was mostly defined through the concept of alterity. Individuals and departments repeatedly defined their position in terms of what they are not or have not yet achieved instead of establishing a concrete identity. We might even say that justification was the primary tool of identity creation rather than highlighting one's assets. When I was introduced to my team at the insurance, it deliberately applied a negative identity. Instead of a mentality of *That's how it is*, the word *Not* became a marker for distinction.

After all, the concept of fashion did not appear with regard to its second characteristic though. The self-destructive character could not yet be seen. As this aspect refers to a process, it may only be detected when we take a closer look at particular practices.

5.3. Dream of a clean-desk competence individual

A last image could be detected upon coming to the field. Scanning through the literature and previous studies it turned out that expectations concerning the notion of e-government were almost always the same (Capgemini, 2004; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004; Grundén, 2009; Leitner, 2006). Frequently highlighted characteristics of an ideal employee in times of digitization were: to be more efficient and faster in work processes, less paper

work and a clean desk, to be flexible in terms of acquiring new competences and more responsibility for one's own work. Especially the clean desk individual is a recurring ideal in most policies defining optimal candidates. Moreover, a primary objective for most followers of the trend is to enhance IT competences. Proficiency in information technology is said to be a necessary requirement to perform well. If this was not enough

"… [t]he idea is to eventually have no paper on our desks anymore. In other words, they have this clean desk ideal, where you either have your laptop or your desktop computer and then you just come here and absolutely everything is processed on the computer. […]"[4]

Apart from technological competences, it was the clean desk ideal that was related to first by my interview partners' at the state department. It once more begs the question though, whether this commonly desired ideal, just as thriving IT competences, is lived up to in reality. From previous experiences in private companies I could monitor that it may, indeed, become true. However, public administrations seem different. My personal expectations of a modern administration were circling around printers, telephones and, of course, very flat screens. I imagined a world of intense communication and emailing. Why, because is that not dream having already come true in everyone's home? But my first impressions at the health insurance and the state department left me confused. At the state department plenty of technology was present. I saw telephones with menus I had not seen before, computers were slim and modern and the graphics on the walls were detailed, complicated laser prints. Yet, they were not being used. The screen was switched off and the tables were scattered with paper work. The quote above may suggest long-term changes towards a clean desk, but this is clearly a top-down ideal. Or is it not? How else could you explain that despite all acceptance of e-government, people obviously stuck to paper-based work? If anywhere, is it not in the state department for economy and technology that I could have expected champions of the IT world? As we will see in the next chapter, the unwillingness to acquire IT competences was and is, in fact, unrelated to the acceptance of e-government. Particularly and ironically in the department of economy and technology, people could simply see no improvement of their work efficiency through the application of extended e-government. It is evident from the interviews and

[4] The statement was given by one of the interviewees at the state department of economy and technology of one of the sixteen *Bundesländer*. The question was to describe plans for e-government in this particular department. The interview was held in German, with no recording allowed. The quote is, thus, a free translation from the notes.

desk research in general that IT training policies collide with reality. A recurring argument by all participants was that IT competences are often outsourced or put in the hands of specific IT departments anyway. But this strategy eventually puts other employees in the very same position as customers. They become mere users of information technology. A question presents itself in this thought process. Do you expect customers on top of their daily IT use to educate themselves to maintain their technological components? It might seem that the digital divide is created inside the organization just as it is outside.

The confusion around these observations is clarified in later discussions. Once more it shall be made clear that this chapter was only a picture of first impressions, the immediate dialectic of ideals versus what is actually encountered in the field. The picture is now going to be set in motion and the "why" of these circumstances is identified.

6. The Doing – What happens in practice?

A picture is static. In order to see what comes before and after its moment, it is necessary to set it in motion. Let us see how it was painted and what more is to come. So how is *what* has been encountered practiced on a daily basis? What is behind the image and how and *why* is it painted the way it is? The current chapter identifies practices which have led up to these first impressions and clashes between vision and reality in the field. Be advised to understand the upcoming parts as limited thematic sequences. Each of the five scenes discusses a particular practice which has been identified as a common denominator for many public services.[5] Only the following chapter shall then try to make sense of e-culture and bring *having* and *doing* together.

[5] Because plenty of material was gathered and the primary goal was to identify general divergences between e-government vision and implementation, not all of the fieldwork material is considered. Finding common denominators also led me to exclude one or the other typically German practice, which is often not only an e-government problem anyway. These problems may, thus, rather be discussed in a separate paper on German administrations. Nevertheless, reflections have been made on the German context of the material.

6.1. Doing old things differently or doing new things?

The doubt that comes with change is always whether it actually changes something. Who is not familiar with the enthusiasm at New Year's Eve? Plans are made and we are absolutely sure that this time everything will change. But let us be honest, how long does it last? It is like an addiction, like a smoker repeatedly reassuring himself that he could stop smoking any time, but is just not willing to. He tries, but after some weeks has comforted himself, knows that he could easily continue and is now ready to smoke again. Czarniawska (2002) argues that change often fails, because new behavioral patterns are always applied from within old habitual frames first. Most of the time, this eventually leads to reinforcing old patterns by reassuring their functionality.

When I got to know several public servants, everything fitted well into this concept. There were all these metaphorical smokers who knew they were supposed to have a clean desk, be flexible and more or less technologically competent. Despite all ideals the desks were scattered and paper work dominated the office, just as if to ask why being so flexible after all? After some interviews and weeks of work, doubt set in over the general applicability of this explanation. What if there was a reason behind this attitude? What happens if, for a moment, we assume it is right to maintain old habits?

The days at the state department were dominated by paper and bureaucracy. Still, it should not be misunderstood. German administrations are not universally stuck in medieval ages. Computers, telephones, modern equipment are just as common as everywhere else. Instead of hearing the humming of computers, the air at the state department was filled with a soft rustling of paper. The discrepancy of expected and actual sounds led me to think about what the odds of modernity versus old-fashionedness were. If I was to summarize a common response, it would probably sound like this: We feel like having to do essentially the same work and cannot really see how this new way of doing it is in any way more beneficial than how we do it now. The statement recurred frequently in the state department and the insurance. It somewhat resembles the smoker image. You know the equipment is there and so is the willingness to *go digital*, but, at the same time, you are also aware that the new tools are needless right now. Just to know that there are in reach whenever necessary, reassures current behavior. What does that actually mean? Is it really that simple?

"They [the top management and policy makers] have this idea that you get more freedom and work individually, but the reality is less freedom and more control. Of course, we do the same things on the computer and when we work on new requests etc. and that is not the problem. But the thing is that everything you do is monitored and saved. Really every document you download or every draft you start working on is saved somewhere on a central server. Nothing of your work is actually individual and you do not make your own decision. But is that not what they want us to" (Male interviewee at the state department)?[6]

Obviously, it is not as simple. The interviewee is clearly concerned about trust and responsibility. The practice of throwing away becomes a key element of self-determination. However, the answer contains something else too. To fit daily practices to machine processes is widely regarded to be out of sync with the perception of why people still work in such offices in the first place. Individual decision-making, on a case-by-case basis, is both important for the department as well as the customer. What is striking is how the interviewee perceives the same practice to change its character dramatically when it is done by a new "electronic colleague". A power conflict emerges. As a consequence, his daily practices are not significantly altered by e-government or technology. There was, and as I could see still is, a physical experience of holding files or customer forms in his hands. With electronic processes this physical sensation may be gone, but the truth is that he still handles files and forms. Even though handling electronic forms is a different practice, it is, with regard to the heading of this part, not new. Nonetheless, my interview partner thought differently. To him the physicality of handling paper was an empowering characteristic. The paper, thus, is a marker for control, it is limited, it is there, it is present. The here and now is changed through the machine. A computer which indirectly controls his work by saving everything that is done, exerts a strong supervising power (Foucault, 2000). Who is in charge, whose rules do I follow? Is it me who determines directions, or is it the machine? The employees clearly felt their responsibility being taken away.

It is necessary to decide individually. It is simply impossible to base every decision on a database of possible scenarios or on what people send in via fixed electronic forms. Now that I still have my paper, I can make rough drafts or if something is useless I just throw it away. But every useless thing is saved in a digital system. It is not good when you know nothing is really in

[6] The extract is a translated approximate quote from one of the interviewees at the department of economy and technology.

your own hands anymore and fit to a machine. Why would they have needed us until now then […]" (Male interviewee at the state department)?

What can be perceived here is an urge to justify one's work to a centralized mechanism. But what is more, there is fear that something like a simple electronic form may eventually be the first step to replace human work. In a way and at least from the interviewees' perspective, this situation approximates to Jeremy Bentham's pantopticon, which is also discussed by Foucault (2000). The technology is not only a controlling power, it also takes away knowledge and competence (Hummel & Carnevale 1992). The conflict surrounding technology acquiring controlling power is not new. When Paul Proteus stands in front of his machines, he is aware that these are, in fact, a representation of past human labor (Vonnegut, 1999). They are not independent, but they are imitations of engineers who had once programmed them. From this point of view, there is a very general fear in those offices that the technological process has the power to not only control the employees' work, but also eventually make them superfluous.

Apart from power relations, e-government technologies alter work culture in a more factual way. E-government brings a very real challenge to office life at the state department, namely by increasing complexity.

"[…] Saving everything is not always good. In fact, when I have to save everything what do you think how incredibly much information will be stored within a very short time. You cannot simply save everything. Of course, it is not problem with simple things like forms, but most tasks are much more complex. So far we were able to throw away things when they were not interesting. And if they were interesting we just put them in files. When you need them, all the information is in one file and it just takes seconds to get it. […] With a database you have to catalogue everything. What do you think how much time we devote everyday to think of some keywords for the search engine? When you have done that several times you do not think about those keywords anymore. The result is that you just make up something to be fast, the quality does not matter. And now imagine there is a new boss who wants other keywords. In the long run the mass of information becomes disinformation" (Female interviewee at the state department).

The last sentence could not have been more similar to what I encountered during my employment at the insurance. While computer systems are supposed to ease work, they actually distract people from it. A simple task like cataloguing, thus, becomes a main occupation. The eventual problem is that people get bored with this task and fall

into routines that slow down a system which was supposed to help. At the insurance my colleagues showed an astonishing work ethic. I had problems keeping up with their speed. But often enough, conversations were also revolving around how to do things rather than to actually do them. During my observations I could not miss how one colleague redesigned a new electronic form probably three times. Interestingly, this was not about a classic form of e-government as I first thought it would be. The form was not redesigned to have a better appeal to customers, it was done to match software requirements. I found it striking that even though e-government is often employed to ease work by automatizing simple tasks, it can have quite the opposite effect. My colleagues spent, in fact, more time on maintaining the system than using it. As an IT department our main task was to provide knowledge and help concerning electronic processes. Has e-government failed at this point? Its supporters argue that work processes can be automatized so that information management eventually becomes a main occupation of humans. However, drawing on the observations made in the insurance's IT department, a digital system's growing complexity may actually impede its own goal. At least this is what many of our discussions revealed. Apart from that, there is a clear limit to the application of automatized processes when it comes to qualitative work, as can be seen in various parts of my study. If everyone became an information manager, who would then be responsible for the actual work? The two examples from the state department and the insurance signify in how far routines of information management may become their own problem.[7]

Apart from cataloguing as an element to alter existing work habits, why is it that routines seem to establish so fast in public administrations? Key informant Klaus allowed me to gain interesting insights on this question. Since Klaus was still relatively new in his department, he was not yet familiar with the requirement for significant IT skills and more general training for other aspects of the job. Still and despite the training and help by his colleagues, what seems most amazing is how resistant Klaus seemed to changing his work habits throughout the whole period of contact. As a matter of fact, I noticed that Klaus's behavior is not an exception in the public sector.

[7] At this point the reader may wonder about the differences between general computerization and e-government. E-government is not necessarily very different from general digitization, with the exception that it is set in public administrations. Consequently, not for everything discussed in this paper there is a clear line between the more general computerization and e-government – also because some practices are very similar and only differ in their respective context.

They key to his resistance seems to lie in the relative safety public administrations provide. The health insurance provides safe jobs. Klaus did not worry about getting fired, simply because his employer is a typical example of what Czarniawska (2002) calls the paradox of the public sector. Klaus knows his insurance is economically stable. Its public funding will not disappear, there is hardly any competition and a permanent customer base. So what is there to worry about? His employment has a reliable basis and, consequently, he is not too concerned about changing routines, irrespective of his position. With regard to his latest job, I found him repeatedly putting himself in a victimized position. He argued he would not have sufficient IT knowledge and that he would not be able to keep up with young and fast learning employees. Instead of taking action, Klaus often made remarks that he would rather prefer to work in another department. He did this with a sense of calmness, knowing that nothing would happen if he proceeded a little slower than others. His calmness eventually seemed to originate from a strong trust in his employer.

The attitude can be approximated to a phenomenon around the concept of trust which Frykman et. al (2009) discuss in their comparative study on sick leave figures in two Swedish communities. In one community a sense of entrepreneurialism, self-responsibility and group responsibility prevails. The sick leave figures are low, because reliance on the state is a sign of laziness and exploiting the group. The other community, however, has significantly higher sick leave figures, because people do not trust their own responsibility. Instead they rely on the state to provide them a safety net. Klaus and other public servants fit quite well into the latter picture. Klaus, too, is aware of a safety net and, therefore, seems less eager to improve himself. He and others in the health insurance adapt to new jobs, but only slightly alter their habits. Instead, they pile up knowledge and attitudes over the years and incorporate them into their current position, creating a habitus that eliminates any motivation to change (Bourdieu, 1993). And here routines come back to us again. Klaus is dominated by an attitude that teaches him how new ideas are not required to stay in his current job. They come and go. He knows that his habitus has survived so far. E-government is nothing more than a “new fashion”. From the steadiness of his insurance’s performance he deduces that his habits are successful. The fashion of e-government is, thus, translated into old habits, framing the new from the perspective of the old (Czarniawska, 2002). And why change a reliable pattern? The paradoxical irony of this behavior is its synergy with fear. It is not a fear of loosing the job, but a fear of leaving a comfortable position in the hierarchy.

This surfaced especially in the practices of the health insurance's IT department. A mentality of sticking to the rules is successful and does not need uncomfortable changes. Routines work, and especially in a public service they work because of a void of free market competition which punishes bad performances. I want to remind the reader of the introductory scene of this paper. When I sat in our team office and listened to requests for help from other departments, it was astonishing how resistant people can be to new things. Not that these people were unwilling to learn about new software or were blind to its benefits. But their trust in successful routines and subconsciously impeded change and so the same questions arrived again and again. Learning outcomes seemed to have been forgotten within minutes.

"I do not understand why they don't just look at the handouts we have given them. We have trained them, given them handouts and still they are calling back for the same problem again and again. What do they think we do up here? Do they think it is all useless stuff we create" (Employee at the IT department)?

The actual irony is that this practice is maintained even though everyone, including the heads of the department, would like to be innovative. However, during the time of the merger routines dominated all levels of the hierarchy, because it was simply the most comfortable way. The heads of the departments reinforced their positions by communicating their status even more. The employees, in turn, seemed to accept this power play and secured their own spots. Everyone fell into routines, knowing it would be the safest way to go.

The non-competitive nature of public administrations reinforces them to remain in what has worked so far. This is significantly different from private institutions. E-government is pressed into the mold of old patterns, but can we blame them? These routines have been successful. Unfortunately, one major attribute of routines is the time it takes to establish them. As I could experience in the insurance, the state department, and also during my desk research is that culture does not seem to be a determining factor in this case. If there is any determining factor, it is the difference between competitive organizational culture and public culture that matters. Irrespective of which country we are talking about, public services are models of routine effectiveness. And is that not what we want them to be? Whether we like it or not, but on these grounds there is a logical reason to be skeptical about changes such as e-government.

6.2. The concept of trust in digitization

Is e-government good? It does have the potential to improve performances. Vital questions are though *where*, to *what* extent and *how* these improvements occur. In the health insurance and the state department of economy and technology e-government was mostly visible in general administrative processes, such as handling customer forms, communication and scheduling appointments. These daily practices have become, without a doubt, much more efficient. The benefits have become so normal that unsurprisingly no one questioned them and made constant and proficient use of them. The system was being trusted. In fact, reviewing my trip through public administrations it seems that trust is one of the most vital components for successful implementation of e-government. But let us not be too hasty, as these widely accepted benefits have the potential to overshadow seemingly irrelevant practices which can create great disruptions.

One of those "irrelevant" practices is the apparently normal act of saving data. In public administrations this practice is often a matter of safety standards. Now, can safety standards be bad? My immediate, and slightly German, response would be that they are not, especially not when it comes to state institutions. The reason why I refer to my nationality here is that the German legislation is well known for its consuming passion for safety standards. Nevertheless I think there is a general point to it. After all, a state is the entity we inevitably have to trust the most. But the question recurring throughout my participant observation and interviews was whether overemphasizing a practice can eventually impede its own goal. At the state department, saving data was reported to be one of the tasks which has almost become a subconscious routine. Every day, every data is either automatically stored or has to be backed up manually. In this regard, I have already mentioned the practice of cataloguing and how it negatively affects the employees' self-responsibility. Quite the same is true for the act of saving. During the interviews it repeatedly came to the fore that these safety processes, originating in digitization, are to certain extents perceived as mistrust in the staff's work.

"[…] So far we were able to throw away things when they were not interesting. And if they were interesting we just put them in files. When you need them you have all the information in one file and it just takes seconds to get it. And this is necessary, because you have to make individual decisions. Customers are individual too and then it is better when you sometimes just drop a

certain case because the situation requires it. That is easy! When everything is saved, you always feel watched. And anyway, all these procedures and rules, that does not work in a complex situation. Like it is now, you are not responsible for your own decisions anymore […]" (Female interviewee at the state department)[8]

Even though she did not explicitly bring it up, her intonation and language clearly indicated her struggle with the loss of trust. The fact that she and the other interviewee repeatedly referred to the seemingly old-fashioned practice of throwing away, shows how vital it actually is as an element of trust and self-responsibility. Quite a similar perspective on e-government is described by Schwester (2009) who observes both the information overload created by date storage and exposure of the individual to a new, ever-present public.

The irony of this limitation to e-government is that individuality and self-responsible decision-making are major aspects in all policies supporting its implementation. However, the perception of a centralized, data saving control mechanism seems to have an opposite effect. Do we not encounter a dialectic between *having* and *doing* digitization here (Miller, 2001)? This perceived control also reinforces another of Czarniawska's (2002) paradoxes of the public sector. The more efficient bureaucracy becomes, the less human it turns out to be. Several of the observed practices during my employment at the insurance brought this to the fore. Unfortunately one might object, I was on the side of the controlling power, the IT department. Hence, it may have been difficult to realistically judge both tension and reaction by those affected. However, I claim to have gotten quite an elaborate picture of the situation through minor and often ironic remarks by the IT staff. A particularly striking example of this is how mistakes by the call-center staff could be tracked with seemingly endless precision by the IT department. My fellow colleagues were not only able to track the name of the employee, but also the exact time and location of the mistake. They often reacted with annoyance and anger to these mistakes. Discussions were held about specific people who repeatedly failed. In the same way, it was interesting to hear how people's belonging to the insurance was classified by how many mistakes they had made so far and how many they were allowed to make as newcomers. It was striking to me how much misunderstanding was created. By making these observations from *above*, it started to occur to me how intimidating these technological possibilities must

[8] The quote is a continuation of the approximate quote on page 37.

be for those who make the mistake. Now, from a standpoint of quality management the practice may be highly efficient and successful, but the benefits are not all that clear. The long-term effects of this kind of control, or discrepancy between *having* and *doing*, are unknown (Miller, 2001). Most employees were in constant exposure to a controlling public. It is probably such examples that best convey frequent concerns about an emerging Big Brother. Although a certain public exposure can potentially be beneficial, overdoing public control can significantly affect the trust in individual decisions and, thus, motivation.

The perceived loss of trust can be related to another phenomenon in the public service community. For this purpose I would like to come back to Klaus once more. Now being a controller implied extensive contact with departments all over the organization. He needed to gather plenty of information for his reports. However, one particular paradox made this task significantly harder. As the health insurance was about to follow a general fashion, its workforce had to become more flexible and team-oriented. For this purpose, it promoted team-oriented structures and cross-departmental communication. Furthermore, it supported self-responsibility and independent work. What was paradoxical about this development is that it actually stiffened communication and made it much harder for Klaus to get necessary information.

"It is really annoying. Even at my office people are reluctant to give me proper answers. I mean they know that I am new, but do you think they make any efforts to help me? Not to mention other departments. It seems as if everyone fears someone would take something away from them. It is horrible how much everyone tries to protect their work. No one really cooperates with anyone. It is more like a competition and no one wants to loose their face. And the funny thing is, it is even worse now that we work in teams and should actually talk more with each other" (Interview with Klaus).

In how far is this paradox related to e-government? What Schwester (2009) calls a new public exposure with regard to politicians going online, may also be true for the health insurance. In the first part of this chapter I mentioned that digitization has the tendency to overly expose an employee's actions, which is perceived by those employees as an urge to justify their work. It starts with emailing and chatting, but often enough it is forgotten what an immense power IT departments have in this development. Klaus and also my colleagues at the IT department told me how even screensavers were preinstalled and any change was strictly prohibited. It gave me the impression that

especially computers in public services are strongly surveilled. At the same time though, flexibility and responsibility are promoted as necessary assets of a good employee. The conflict is the same in every case. Is the team a retreat from constant public exposure in the digital organization? Is it a form of identity building, of establishing one's otherness in an otherwise deliberately promoted, borderless organization? The reactions I encountered are not too different from general human behavior in times of uncertainty. Identity building is a concept that is often taken as the last straw whenever external factors become unclear (Eriksen, 1993). In Klaus's case it appears to be difficult to gather information, because these teams try to protect their assets and create identity through alterity (Czarniawska, 2002). When we compare this situation to Frykman et al.'s (2009) study on the two Swedish communities, the teams at the insurance seem to resemble the case of the entrepreneurial county. In this county trust is not created by just being there, but by working oneself into the community. It is, in other words, a sense of community created through similar habits, similar work ethic and similar goals. The constant exposure to a centralized system in the health insurance can, consequently, lead these teams to create own islands of identity too. Naturally then, it is almost impossible for outsiders to access the group.

"These teams all do their own things, as if to protect the work they do. Whenever I come and ask them something, it feels like they are talking to me from above, as if they know something I could never know"(Interview with Klaus).

6.3. Which is the right question?

When something turns from a niche product to a hype, it seems natural that all eyes focus on it. Trends are born and become fashion. Once they have become largely available and obtained by everyone the fashionable is not so fashionable anymore. In how far does e-government differ? My work with the consultancy allowed me to gain some more insights into the trend, not only in Germany but worldwide. Even when taken for granted that there are, indeed, some highly successful e-government champions, it cannot be denied that it creates immense pressure to jump onboard the train, regardless of whether it fits the local setting. No one wants to lack behind.

The problem with public administrations and the concept of fashion is that they, even more so than private companies, frequently run into a fashion paradox (Czarniawska, 2002). While all administrations have an urge to keep up with the trend, they also feel a

need to distinguish themselves. This paradox can especially be seen when it comes to city administrations. From this point of view, it could be one of the major reasons for the current hustle for identity creation. Yet, whether identity or alterity creation is the way to go, it inevitably involves processes of translation, or, worse, it does not.

A particular aspect of fashionable e-government is its seemingly unquestioned need for more IT skills and ICT training is often the only focus[9]. Just take a look at the German health insurance. Throughout my whole time of employment, the merger of both insurances was discussed in terms of technology. The air was filled with questions. How to merge differing administrative systems, how to educate the staff? Do we need new forms or do we stick to our old way? How do we send out emails and invitations? Whose financial system is applied? Never did I hear discussions about differing work cultures, about differing competences, even though these unmistakably existed. As it may once more be claimed that I worked in the IT department, extensive reflection on this limitation was required. The picture remains the same. My experience at the state department and in the insurance suggests that an exaggerated technological focus is clearly out of sync with its daily practice.

What becomes strikingly obvious in the daily application is that profound IT skills are, in fact, not needed. Most of the time, relevant skills are outsourced to independent companies or specific IT departments. This is not new obviously, but in light of the former it surprises even more that information technology is praised as a solution for current acceptance problems. I have talked about Klaus' problems of getting accustomed to his new job before. Superficially then, learning to deal with the new system and related IT skills must be the right answer. But let me take a closer look at his daily work. As it turns out, his problem is not a general lack of technological competences, nor is it necessarily a lack of understanding information technology. Extensive discussions about different perspectives on understanding ICT are postponed to the next part. Already now though I would like to clarify that this lack of understanding particular technological aspects must not be mixed up with a generalized lack of understanding for ICT. Some of Klaus' practices make this very clear. His fear about the new job and subsequent problems to integrate are primarily due to his laziness to acquire new competences for this job. Unfortunately, some of these skills require further

[9] Many studies suggest IT skills to be the key element for successful implementation of e-government structures (Australian Government. Department of Finance and Administration. 2006; Capgemini, 2004; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004).

IT competences. But it must be clear that these are specifically related to this part of his work. As it turns out, his problems are task-related and not technology-related. What I could experience during my contact with Klaus and the participant observation was that technological skills widely exist. No one was afraid of using computers. Klaus switched on his computer every day, just as everyone else. He checked his mail, used the calendar function, created spreadsheets and more. IT skills have been present for a long time, just as computers and telephones, and we should not jump to conclusions about a general IT inability. The same is true for all modern means of communication. Everywhere in the health insurance, people made use of internal chat programs and email systems. Even the lunch time was used to search for the next bus connection or book a holiday flight. So what do we make of this? ICT skills are not the problem. During the merger of the insurances and the introduction of new software, the actual application posed no problem. For most people it eventually was just a matter of learning another new mouse-click. The question is less which skills are acquired, but when and how. Irrespective of whether talking about Klaus, other insurance employees or the two state department interviewees, it always was a matter of work-related knowledge. Leitner (2006) hints in the same direction. In the initial stages of new developments, no radically new skills are required. Instead it often comes down to a few new, simple applications. Radically new IT skills are mostly superfluous. Apart from that, it should be mentioned that what is so vividly being promoted is already happening. The evolution of technology does not stop in front of an office door. New computers and programs enter the market every day. People adapt to these developments. Similarly IT competences are increasing among employees as well. The only exception is a phenomenon that can be seen in every field. Profound skills are always the grail of a few specialists. Technological skills are not any different and only few people are needed to manage them (Leitner, 2006) – people who already exist in IT departments.

Ultimately, my experiences suggest that often it is rather about asking the right question than following the fashion trend without any contextual translation.

"It is not the IT that is good or bad. It is the employee that either fails or not. It is his personal competences, motivation etc. But the IT is just a means to do the work. We do not have a problem with IT. On the contrary, no one here would be against a new means if it worked. But as it is now, we are just simply better without" (Male interviewee at the state department).

Both interviewees at the state department made this very clear. An expanding e-government is unproblematic and would be widely supported, given that it was an improvement to their daily work, and not the ultimate goal. IT is a means which can, at best, improve the effectiveness of particular tasks, but it is wrong to assume everything would change with a top-down policy. For my interviewees, there was nothing more destructive than a generalizing IT policy or to put these competences above everything else. Coming back to the main issue of this part, the previous point contains a vital step forward. IT is perceived as a method, an enabler and not a new competence per se. Just as telephones help us to improve communication, they are not automatically essential to communicate. The practices encountered during the fieldwork differed in terms of work-related competences and not in terms of technological intelligence. This also has implications for discussions about the digital divide, which not only affects customers of e-government but the staff itself. Given that actual work competence is still more important for the job, it follows that especially older staff is still very, if not more, valuable than young IT professionals. This was confirmed by the state department's employees, who reported that it is of importance to be technologically proficient. Yet, everyone can do that. However, a new employee at the department would still have to acquire professional knowledge, in order to be successful. One of them remarked that

"[…] older people may be a bit slower with IT, but that does not mean they are unable to work. Often I see them work even more effectively than the new young academic professionals we have over here. And why? Well, just simply because they know their job" (Male interviewee at the state department).

While younger staff would be quicker with certain tasks, the overall performance of older staff concerning complex tasks would still be better in the long run. The department clearly attributed this to profound work experience, even though applied administrative tools are sometimes outdated.

We come back to Leitner (2006) at this point. Preferring discussions about required skills is often overrated and in disregard to more significant concerns about when and how these skills should be acquired. This brings back the difference between doing things differently and doing new things from chapter 6.1. When it is applied to the present case, IT knowledge may just be a means. Ultimately it is actual work competences that are determining performance (Grundén, 2009). If e-government is,

indeed, intended to be a new form of government, the change process must be communicated as a matter of doing new things.

6.4. Information literacy

What is e-government, if not a technological development? It certainly is technological, but should not be mistaken as a goal. So why not refocus and ask, what is the goal of e-government? To do this, let me move e-government completely out of the focus for an instant. What can be seen then is that primary goals are often an improved communication and organization. But this also implies that professional goals have not changed. It is just the *how to*. Thinking of ideals such as fast customer handling and even faster and better digital communication, it seems wise to follow another route and see what happens. So let us follow the information itself through an organization.

While I was about to visualize the fieldwork, and in particular two months of observation, information started to become a focal point in itself. I started to try and see information like a living part of the organism. Bits of information, just like the rest of the staff, passes and wanders through the insurance, merely in a digital way. Information comes and it goes again, just like a meet and greet between people. It has never been different, only that it is faster now. And like employees before, it seems that information has become “a series of disconnected islands” (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004). Why, because not all information can be in one place. You find bits here and bits there, depending on whose responsibility it is.

During my employment at the IT office, one major question came up. Is it possible to achieve the ideal of a family-like organization with easy cross-boundary communication? Surely, there must always be communicative differences and misunderstandings. But even from a rational perspective it seems quite impossible. The reason could be something called information literacy. While sitting through the office days, it was interesting to see how different perspectives were almost always the reason for misunderstandings in the organization. A scene from the introduction of new software during the merger of the insurances is a good example. I sat in the IT department, which was also responsible for training and advice concerning the system. Being somewhat an information illiterate person and outsider, neither developer nor daily user, it was striking to observe how the team reacted to the constant onslaught of

calls for advice. They often seemed unnerved that calls repeatedly brought up the same questions. Small team discussions emphasized their perspective in that the team could not understand why people were just not able to learn those *simple* things or could not find solutions to easy problems themselves. As an illiterate guest myself, however, it was possible to relate to the other side too. When Mol (2002) describes how the same disease can, in fact, be interpreted as two different diseases depending on the means of detection, then different realities were created. The IT staff made its anamnesis, the callers made theirs. My team was IT-literate, it was their main profession. However, try to imagine the other side. Sitting in the call-center, the heat of hundreds of telephones and computers around you. There is a never-ending mumbling, pressure to perform and acquire customers. You hang up your phone, take a deep breath, click, and the next one is already waiting on your list. How much time is left to deal with an error message on your screen? By listening to their calls it became obvious that their concept of e-government technologies is radically different. For the call-center employees information technology is a means, a specific tool for work. And who does not buy a hammer in a DIY store and assumes it to serve its purpose? However, from the perspective of the IT staff the new software is a goal in itself. As a consequence, understanding the software is a major requirement. During the observation, both sides seemed unaware of this significant difference, which resulted in strong prejudices. For the reader it may become clearer now why the IT department was bombarded with calls even after having conducted extensive training. While the training sessions had all been produced by the IT staff, it had, obviously, created a very different reality around the notion of e-government than their listeners. While they were lacking the perspective of other employees and kept their own notion of e-government in mind, they unconsciously targeted the wrong audience. What is more important though, the other employees' perspective on the technology simply did not involve any responsibility beyond its mere use. The rest of the staff had developed a blind spot and even if they had been able to solve minor technological problems, they did not waste a single thought on it. It turns out their calls were neither necessarily due to IT illiteracy nor bad intentions. E-government was simply defined radically different.

I would already like to introduce another concept at this point which is discussed in a later part of this chapter. While different realities of e-government are created, employees also draw different conclusions concerning their responsibilities. This must not automatically be considered to be their fault. The situation is also a result

of power relations and a friction between feelings of superiority and inferiority (Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008). The study by Tzu-Chuan et al. draws quite the same conclusions and attributes major organizational misunderstandings to different perspectives on information literacy. In essence, differing perspectives are a major cause for thriving individualism and islands of autonomy in an otherwise communicative organization.

Information literacy has an effect in other respects too. When IT is mostly a means rather than an end, it is information management that becomes a key competence. This is not new, and knowledge management competence is an important training objective in every company undergoing e-government changes. For public administrations the issue may be slightly different. Particularly in Germany, it is also a matter of age. State employees are rarely fired and rather shifted to other positions. The earlier situational description is an ideal example. Depending on the goal, it is by no means a requirement or even possible to know everything. The practice the "IT-illiterate" staff applied at the insurance is such a form of information management. Specific software knowledge was not classified to be relevant. The *illiterates,* instead, attributed this knowledge to the IT department and relied on its competence if necessary. It would be an appealing comparison to see, whether there are similar structures in private companies, where staff is exposed to a more competitive environment and time pressure. The pattern of the current case resembles one of minimal effort. Is this caused by the administration's safety net? Steadiness and strong hierarchies appear to hold routines in place. It is safer to stick to one's own competences and, without further elaboration, consult other departments. At least, it may be safer than breaking out of habitual structures that provide comfort for all. This is quite a similar routine of trust as in the study of the two Swedish communities (Frykman et al., 2009). As long as every member of the community follows the rules, no questions are asked. But once a part of the web is destabilized, a circle of mutual suspicion sets in, and with it questions about who can be trusted and who cannot.

Bruce finds similar strategies. In her study on *Workplace experiences of information literacy* she identifies seven perspectives which have been established on the issue of information literacy. What makes her study suitable for the present discussion is that public policy stakeholders were not involved. The results are only based on the opinions and difficulties of employees with the concept of information literacy.

"I don't think that people have time to sit down and learn every new package. […] I think that you should be able to use the personnel that have that experience. [For example] I got quite a lot of help from our librarian in terms of looking for new books in the field. [...] [Y]ou could probably spend a day trying to do that yourself, for instance" (Bruce, 1999, 37).

Irrespective of whether private or public institution are in the focus, an important argument is brought up in these fieldwork responses. Especially knowledge management cannot be taught on a generalized basis. Every individual employs different strategies and work practices. It turns out to be worth a thought whether these individual strategies are, in fact, beneficial to an organization's performance and should be given more value (Bruce, 1999). In terms of the growing complexity of today's information, the approach taken by the insurance employees could, hence, not only have been a subconscious reaction to information overload, but also a routine practice which has proven to be successful. From the mere point of effectiveness it is also understandable that a habitual practice which has become almost natural, is not given up in favor of a prescribed uniform knowledge management concept (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010).

Comparable opinions surfaced in the state department. It would have to be excepted that especially older people, it was argued, employ different strategies for gathering information. Just because they are not as reliant on information technology, would not necessarily worsen their handling of information. It would not matter how a person acquired information, as long as he or she managed it appropriately.

"I don't think you need to be technologically literate provided you have other sources of gathering that information which may be using people who are technologically literate. Yes. I don't think it's an essential ingredient for the individual but [the technology] sure makes it easier. ... [Yet] I'm sure there must be plenty of people who are quite computer illiterate who are good information users" (Bruce, 1999, 41).

From an information management standpoint it remains to be seen whether maintaining old strategies is actually beneficial to an organization that wants to be progressive. However, regarding the social divide and obvious difficulties to realize grand visions of a flawlessly communicating company, the employees' strategies may have a point. So, is it wiser to simply accept different information management strategies as long as they

are effective? Why not accept a digital and social divide and rather adapt training to individual needs (Grundén, 2009)?

6.5. Responsibility and reward

I have discussed how trust and information literacy affect state employees in their daily work. I have shown how mechanization can create feelings of insecurity and decreasing self-confidence. Lastly, I tried to find out how different views on information literacy create different kinds of e-government. During my travel through public administrations I noticed that concepts of trust and information literacy often converge on, or at least influence, a last concept, responsibility and reward. E-government tends to significantly shift power relations in public services. It is not necessarily an actual shift, but a perceived one with effects on behavior and practice. Changing structures of responsibility and reward surface in two ways. On the one hand, e-government exerts influence when it comes to actively involving people in the change process. This potentially effects feelings of trust and expectations to be rewarded for individual competences. On the other hand, e-government and policies for better digital communication can strongly affect the sociality and culture of work settings.

With regard to the former, a study by Tzu-Chuan Chou et al. (2008) gives valuable insights that are quite similar to my observations. As has been claimed throughout the study, IT skills are often communicated or mistaken to be an ultimate goal rather than a means of work. The latter implies that current work competences are not necessarily changing. Those IT skills that, indeed, require profound knowledge are mostly outsourced to specific IT departments already (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004).

When I compare these practices with widely available policy documents, a typical dialectic between *having* and *doing* emerges (Miller, 2001). Less proficient employees who only apply IT skills as a daily means, automatically become less relevant to overall e-government policies. However, it should be noticed that this group is by far the largest in public services. Being recipients of information technology, this group literally stands on one side of the wall while IT departments stand on the other, automatically receiving much greater attention. It has been found out (Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008) that there is an emerging gap between departments which are directly involved in digitization and those which are not. The problem with this development is a

severely hampered cooperative process among departments. The shyness surrounding Klaus' persona seemed not only to be a personal characteristic. Repeatedly he assured me that his motivation to adapt was low, because as an "old-fashioned" individual he would have no meaning to the insurance anyway. Obviously, being less effective with the new software than other colleagues also decreased his identification with the company. The study by Tzu-Chuan et al. suggests comparable internal divergences, I may even say a digital divide, due to a focus on information technology. Employees who are recipients of digital applications do not feel connected to the overall decision-making process. Motivation is decreasing and so are interaction and cooperativeness, as a result of lacking appreciation. It becomes obvious that the digital divide is not necessarily caused by diverse individual IT skills. The fact that e-government is a means to an end for large parts of the staff and a goal for only a few, seems to create disruptions in terms of reward.

I would like to break this issue down onto an individual level. It enables the reader to see much clearer how a disruption in the responsibility and reward system can possibly unfold. My temporal colleagues and Klaus are good examples. During the fieldwork it was clearly visible how call-center agents were less involved in the merger of the insurances than the IT department. Office life revealed disruptions which were lived out in little wars among the departments. The IT staff felt a lot more prestigious than applicants of the system, who were mostly seen as incapable of dealing with new forms of digitization. A non-expert myself, it was very much understandable how envy became a dominant mood.

Obviously then, the situation turned out to be a significant hindrance to cross-boundary cooperation. On a very general level all studies suggest that less skilled workers are not necessarily acknowledged for their contributions to the change process to the same extent (Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008). By and large this is also attributable to the fact that their work is mostly regarded as remaining the same. With *normal* staff begging for help and not being taken serious, this can easily create a degrading power position.

Yet, the imbalance of power cannot only be ascribed to the IT staff's behavior. The mere presence of e-government does play an equally essential role. It is here that I want to draw on the concept of trust once more. The interviewees at the department of economy and technology based most of their problems on the fact that a centralized system naturally conveys a sense of control from above. It, thus, reduces the perceived individual independence (cf. chaper 6.2). When everything is saved, trust

is significantly affected. Obviously, this loss of trust goes hand in hand with a loss of self-responsibility. Coming back to the practice of throwing away, it can now be seen how empowering this tiny element of work life was before, and which is now taken away. The concept of power here is akin to Jeremy Bentham's idea of a panopticon, as frequently discussed by Foucault (2000). The employees perceived the new digital security guidelines as if their self-responsibility could not be trusted. The extensive control and tracking of the mistakes of the call-center staff is just another example. Though supervision may have been effective, human work culture was obviously disrupted, creating a significant loss of trust.

Responsibility and reward are not only negatively affected by e-government trends. Let us remember:

> "I don't think that people have time to sit down and learn every new package. […] I think that you should be able to use the personnel that have that experience. [For example] I got quite a lot of help from our librarian in terms of looking for new books in the field. [...] [Y]ou could probably spend a day trying to do that yourself, for instance" (Bruce, 1999, 37).

The answer is quite typical for how information management is approached in times of digitization. Increasing requirements for lifelong learning are common nowadays. In the same way, companies strive to develop cross-departmental communication. But whether it is learning or communication, all of it is said to be improved through internet and e-government technologies. The practice described above is just one example of how e-government can be blessing and curse at the same time. What Bruce found out in her study, largely applied to my observations as well. I have mentioned how staff from all over the health insurance related technological matters to the IT department. The reason for this behavior is very likely a different perspective on the notion of e-government. Remember Mol's (2002) discussion of diseases once more. It is not just a disease, because perceptions differ. Either you work at a laboratory or you are an innocent, medically inexperienced patient. For the latter a cough is nothing more than a minor disturbance. All knowledge is based on her or his interpretation of the symptoms. A laboratory, on the other hand, dives into the science of your infection and scrutinizes a world of physiological explanations. Would the patient notice a serious infection by sitting at home? No, because, eventually, its definition completely depends on how it is detected. Now let me bring this picture back to e-government in the insurance. For the call-center staff it is a competence of the IT department. Sure, even in big offices with

hundreds of employees computers are common, but they only and literally consume them. What happens with an error message on the screen? In the end, it is evaluated by someone who merely needs his computer to work. The target is not to get into further contemplations about how it functions. And so it is very much the same as with patients and practitioners. Scientific methods are unnecessary for a cough. Daily knowledge is applied without any motivation towards learning the anatomy of a body. The same relation is established between the call center and the IT department. The anatomy of the computer is neither competence nor responsibility of those who only see its outer appearance. It seems, therefore, that accessing the competence of others becomes a common practice. Ironically, the call center does what it has learned to do in case of a cold, call the doctor. This is a form of digital divide which is not necessarily negative. Considering the utopian vision to converge all competences in one individual, it seems a proper management system by these employees to deliberately deny or outsource a particular responsibility.

However, on a general level this relationship involves a troublesome paradox, which seems largely dependent on the size of public services. By frequently referring to Klaus' experience I have already indicated the problem. While his employer had been eager to set up team-oriented structures and enhance cross-departmental communication with modern technologies, the opposite had, in fact, been established. For Klaus it was difficult to gather information from other departments. Paradoxically, the ideal of a flexible organization had also strengthened autonomy and individualism (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004). This appears to be a general issue. The larger an administration becomes, the less responsible employees feel for the whole. This is even more so the case with public administrations than with private companies. The knowledge of a safe employment stabilizes routines and rejects unfamiliar changes. Coming back to the insurance I hope to clarify my point. Apart from the people's routine to call the IT department for every little detail, the same could be observed vice versa. Everyone, was, in fact, contacting other people to a remarkable extent. It often seemed as if crossing one's line of competence would be a cause for punishment. The organism worked on the basis of the credo: Do what you have always done. At times it was ironic how people willingly accepted the higher effort to follow the rules than effectively employing individual methods. Unfortunately this seemingly efficient system collided with what I previously called islands of autonomy. The parallel occurrence of both

practices impeded the originally beneficial nature of cooperating with other people. When I think of Klaus' case, I may even say that cooperation completely failed at times. Stubborn practices of identity creation led towards an uncooperative system. While everyone was in fear of loosing one's competences, he or she did the opposite of what would have maintained an otherwise effective organizational culture.

As a reader you may rightfully claim that this could be a typical example of German bureaucracy, but when looking at it in a larger picture, Germanness is not at issue here. The insurance's hierarchies are rigid and rules seem to abound. Exceeding one's responsibilities is undesirable and a disturbance to a stable organization. Is it not natural that everyone sticks to his or her assigned tasks? Reliance on each other is key to this system. Even studies carried out in Asia describe the same pattern of people denying responsibilities (Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008). This is interesting in so far, as especially Asian cultures usually tend to have an opposite understanding of teamwork and sense of belonging. While Western European and Anglo-American cultures promote individual problem-solving, Asian cultures usually encourage group-oriented processes. It is, thus, fascinating that similar practices occur in public administrations. Tzu-Chuan et al.'s study mentions that even within team-oriented structures of larger administrations, employees rely on the fact that respective competences exist somewhere else. Therefore, they are not acquired by them.

From what is known about different social concepts in Asian and Western cultures, it seems understandable to ascribe such behavior to the former. But is it not fascinating that local or regional cultures are not a driving force in this case? It instead seems to reinforce the cultural paradox of the public sector in general (Czarniawska, 2002). Bureaucracy on a general basis is the same in every culture, a distinction between the culture of public administrations and other organizational structures.

7. Making Sense of E-Culture

So what is made of this? I started this trip with my account of impressions when entering the field of public administrations. I then started moving and took a walk through administrations. My observations were presented through five major practices which seem common in many cultures. The final question is if and how it may be possible to bring *having* and *doing* e-government back together. Four approaches shall be made to highlight different perspectives on how e-government may possibly be seen in a new light.

7.1. A series of connected islands

Just a few chapters before I cited from a workshop that boils down current public services and the necessity for e-government in statement where governments are like "a series of disconnected islands" (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute 2004, 50). In the same way, a general tendency of reports on e-government (e.g. Capgemini, 2004) is to promote the modern digital employee – self-responsible, self-managing and self-learning.

After having walked through several administrations though, I notice that nothing much seems to change. Instead, old barriers and departmental separation are often strengthened. Many of the observed practices suggest that instead of going outside, employees fear increasing exposure to an ever-present public in the digital world (Hummel & Carnevale, 1992) and rather turn inside. Technology is an entity potentially replacing their jobs, leaving only IT specialists with relevance for the system. The narration of this drama could not be more similar to another famous piece of literature. In Vonnegut's famous novel Paul Proteus' contemplates about conflicts in a mechanized world (Vonnegut, 1999). People have been replaced by the productivity and precision of their machines. Except engineers and higher management, everyone else is irrelevant for the system. Back in the context of my observations, technology as an institution had shifted power relations in that it had created a feeling of permanent surveillance. What is worse, it had given employees the impression that their

competences cannot be trusted. This, in turn, had created feelings of powerlessness (Foucault, 2000). But trust impeded change also in a positive way – positive at least for the individual. The safety of employment was a clear incentive to remain in old routines. The staff relied on the state to care for them (Frykman et al., 2009). But whereas private companies can dismiss ineffective staff, public services face tougher challenges. As a consequence, the habitus acquired by many employees is not automatically opposed by an urge to adapt. On the contrary, even when people are willing to change, it seems that they preferably do this from within frames of routine (Bourdieu, 1993; Czarniawska, 2002).

When I further generalize my observations, the safety of employment almost pushes the public servant into a pattern of small steps. He looks out of the window, he knows that there is fresh air outside, but why leave the house? Open the windows and fresh air comes in anyway, it just takes a little longer. The problem with this strategy is that the house is not left at all. Is that necessarily bad? Not when the house has been a safe guard so far. Eventually it took a long time to build the house and by now every part of it is cozy and has a purpose. The astonishing effectiveness of routines must not be underestimated (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010). Approaching e-government in this way often means to open the windows, but not to build a new house.

However, when e-government is interpreted as doing the job differently but not new, how to change the interpretation? I may answer this question with another provocative question and ask, why change at all? Is it possible to make the whole staff a bunch of self-responsible, information-handling managers by applying unified standards? Why has IT literacy become such an essential requirement? Looking at the divergence of having and doing e-government, it is clear that widely accepted norms often collide with individual practice. The situation resembles Miller's shopping dialectic, with the media creating an objectified representation of how people should dress against the people's actual individual taste (Miller, 2001). Obviously, the resolving element of fashion is lacking here. This is unproblematic, because just as in Miller's shopping example the actors have basically the same goal, namely to get dressed. Government and staff both strive for modern work ideals and digitization is widely acknowledged as the fashion to go with. The *what* is, hence, clear.

Nevertheless, e-government is the fashion and the matter of how to dress remains. Perhaps Czarniawska's (2002) concept of identity and alterity can help at this point. Ironically, current policies are rather normative in creating the individual. This

seems to imply a paradox, at least in comparison with the observed practices. Instead of being normative, a possibly resolving element could be to reconfigure power relations through the concept of identity. Or in other words, the alleged weakness of individual competences or non-existing competences could also be a strength. As I have experienced in the field, all individuals have know-how in one or the other way. In some cases it is information technologies, in others it is the knowledge of how to deal with legal issues, controlling, balance sheets etc. In most cases though, e-government is only means and not end (Leitner, 2006). A lack of IT proficiency does not imply overall work deficiencies. It follows that the purported weakness of having particular and not standardized competences is, at least from the staff's perspective, an empowering element. Now that does not imply that e-government and digitization are wrong. Some skills will necessarily disappear in digital processes. That is why the change process frequently faces resistance. But it must also be understood that communicating e-government as an overall goal, as it is largely being done right now, essentially undermines even those specific competences that are necessary for most jobs. The apparently unimportant practice of throwing away is one such crucial example[10]. In the state department e-government was undoubtedly a useful addition to daily work. Digital means were used for simple tasks such as coordinating appointments among each other, to communicate via email or even, in a calm moment of the day, to check Facebook accounts or podcasts. People were not afraid of digitization, just as everyone else. Yet, the fact that they had to save every process of their work created strong feelings of mistrust, surveillance and power loss to an ever-present technology (Foucault, 2000). If these employees were to maintain control over a complex process such as granting public money to projects – which cannot be handled with standardized procedures anyway – it would probably keep their confidence and joy alive. Without it, quite the opposite happens. People retreat and become even more cautious with increasing loss of power. The threat of a controlling technology naturally causes employees to protect one's assets. Key informant Klaus' difficulty with getting information from different departments is a good example. The feelings were largely the same. The easier availability of resources in the digital world, left them with less relevance for the whole system. And is that not what we can also see in cultural globalization? The urge to define one's identity increases with the threat of becoming

[10] Cf. chapter 6.1

part of an undistinguished mass. The anthropologist Eriksen (1993) claims that all groups are essentially ethnic. People refer to their closest group ethnicity whenever the outward pressure of change processes increases.

In contrast to bringing everyone to the same level, it may be better to make deliberate use of individual differences. It may sound strange, but the fieldwork suggests that people are more willing to cooperate when they are aware of particular competences, but when it is also clear that they need someone else occasionally (Bruce, 1999). It is good to be able to be proud of something. But it is also good to know one's limits, such as having to admit that colleagues from another departments can do better in certain fields. An identity-building e-government policy is like the struggle of cities for impression management, each wanting to be more glamorous than the other (Czarniawska, 2002). If e-government ought to be a fashion, then it may be good to allow departments and individuals to create their own style and be fashionable. In this regard, it seems more likely to create an environment of communication and identity, of healthy little tensions in the system – a series of connected islands – than protectionism and alterity. It should not be forgotten, that this power over oneself is just as beneficial as it is evil, potentially isolating but also motivating.

7.2. Do we have to fell the oak?

"A single stroke won't fell an oak" – we know that. But do we have to fell it? It was just brought up again how the lethargy of public services is created. Working in a German health insurance, Klaus and the others did not need to fear getting fired. The result was a permanent slight easiness about the job. The work may not be completely satisfactory, but somehow job life goes on. And why change when it works quite well? Even though in a different context, the same reasons apply to one of the Swedish counties, which has higher sick leave figures than the other (Frykman et al., 2009). A sense of urgency is lacking, because the welfare state is always a safe base whenever times of unemployment hit the region. With regard the German health insurance, the employment policy is not illogical. It finds its cause in the general setting of public services, in every country. Public services never lack a demand, customers will never disappear and there is hardly any competition. In light of this fact, is it not completely natural that routines become a predominant characteristic?

With the current hype around flexible and adaptable workforces, the previous part has already introduced an idea which may be given further consideration.

Are routines necessarily bad? In fact, they do have a purpose, for why would they be employed otherwise? It seems quite impossible to live without any routines. Routines make up our whole life. The same is true of Klaus' and all the other servants' work lives. Documents are processed with endless, sometimes annoyingly pedantic, precision. The morning coffee is a ritual, just as the lunch break and, of course, the amazingly exact finishing time in the afternoon. Interruptions or alterations are not allowed and punished by the self-preserving mechanism of the system. From my perspective, I curse administrations when the service closes in time, no matter how many milliseconds later I arrive. I become annoyed by pedantic demands for more and more documents to prove that I am eligible for this and that – no divergence from the royal paths allowed. But is that not what I actually want them to do? While flexibility and so-called service-mindedness are hailed, it is things like predictability, safety and precision that are more important. As in the introduction to this study, it should not be forgotten that public services provide a state's basic structure. While I curse public servants for their pedantry, subconsciously I am happy to be able to rely on these rules. They are ultimate, and routines are their major cause.

In light of the fact that state services provide the ground on which we stand, it is quite logical that routines are necessary to provide a perfectly fluent and, most of all, efficient service. When Ehn and Löfgren (2010) employ the picture of morning routines in the bathroom, they do this to show how routines can be beneficial in several ways. A family that has to arrange adequate time slots for all its members will not manage this task in five minutes. The same is true for couples. Imagine the months and years of struggles until both establish a compromise of morning habits. Morning routines, spoken rationally, are simply an efficient way of work.

In the context of the state department and the health insurance, it is no different. Let me bring back the habit of throwing things away. Established during many years of work, something simple like making one's own judgment about when to dispose of things turns into a powerful, and useful habitus (Bourdieu, 1993). By looking at the way the two interviewees clung to their seemingly insignificant responsibility, it had become a task onto which a large part of their work life was based. Not without a cause, the routine had become an effective means to handle complex and often unique customer requests through years of repetition. More and more they had optimized their practice of throwing away to optimally process these requests and provide an efficient service.

For an effective implementation of e-government it is important to not only consider the downside of routines. They do not just impede change. In order to get a realistic picture of routines, it is also essential to consider why they are there in the first place. Without them, perfect and efficient execution, reliability, stability and order would hardly exist.

7.3. Who is the customer? – Turning outside in

As much as e-government is at issue here, it seems clear who benefits from digitization. Most of all it is customers who now become independent and have more means to participate in politics. Only two problems occur frequently. The grand vision of participatory politics, dressed in beautiful terms like Government 2.0, is only slowly progressing. Seldom it is considered that this new way of participation may not necessarily be interesting to people. Who has ever really asked the question if e-government may be regarded as useless, at least by some people? Apart from that, small communities, where e-government is said to have the biggest impact, already have short communication channels and rarely need extensive e-government (Habbel & Huber, 2008). Digital divide is a second problem. While many arguments against e-government refer to age as a cause for diverging user uptake, it is likely that the issue is also related to social class and immigrant exclusion. These problems have been detected early, are well-known and many governments take action. They emphasize customer-oriented improvements. E-government shall be suited to everyone. But do we really know who the customers are?

During my frequent interactions in the two months at the health insurance, it did not seem all that clear who the customers of e-government are. I got confused when I saw how the IT department dealt with *customer requests* from other departments. For the IT department, e-government, new IT systems and the implementation of new digital work processes, were a major daily objective. For other employees it was a means of work, but not a replacement. Interestingly, when looking closely, have I not already used a dichotomization of *we* and *them* at this point? Just as I have separated two different groups of employees, the dichotomization is also visible in disparate definitions of e-government. Or to speak with Mol, while some put e-government into a laboratory and scrutinize it with the whole range of analytical tools, others approach it more practically, searching for an applicable solution with merely their senses and a

stethoscope (Mol, 2002). The result is that e-government becomes something else every time.

In my literal and theoretical walk through public administrations the customers were not only outsiders, but those with the stethoscopes as well. Call-Center agents, the employees at the state department and myself needed a definition of e-government to work with. In a little thought experiment you may put yourself in the position of those office workers – I assume there is a pretty good chance everyone has worked in an office at some point. Every day you turn on your computer, open documents and spreadsheets, you receive calls and requests online. What do you do when one of those famous error messages pops up on your desktop? When I handled client data and something went wrong, it was not important to know about the program's anatomy, it was important to identify the disease and get medication.

It turns out that these differing interpretations of information literacy potentially create the same digital divide in the public sector as it does outside (cf. Bruce, 1999; Tzu-Chuan Chou et al., 2008). Digital government creates a divide among customers insofar as especially elderly people and immigrants face problems in keeping up with increasing online offers. Turning our view back into the administration, similar divides occur among the staff. A call-center agent rarely leaves his or her field of direct customer contact. He or she is only a computer user. Apart from that, there may be employees who are older and need longer to keep up with the pace – just remember what the interviewees at the state department said about their average age.

But this is exactly why an internal divide is not harmful per se (Grundén, 2009). Firstly, e-government is an individually loaded reality. Secondly, considering the customers outside public administrations, an internal divide is potentially better to serve a diversity of customers than a generalization and standardization of all services. Encouraging technological literacy in e-government policies should be considered with regard to these aspects. Is it necessary to provide extensive IT training to everyone? Who will be directly concerned with e-government and whose job remains largely the same? Finally, with all the customer-orientedness is it not worth a thought to provide different versions of "government" depending on which user we are talking about?

7.4. Doing things better vs. doing better things

A recurring issue in this study has been the dialectic between having and doing e-government (Miller, 2001). During my fieldwork, I repeatedly noticed that the widest gap seems to exist in terms of positioning and defining e-government in work practices. What is e-government, the goal, the enabler or a means? What is its role in work culture? On the one hand, there are many public policies which appear to glorify e-government as the ultimate goal. On the other hand, my observations of daily work practices suggest that for most people e-government is by and large a means. The work and work culture remain unchanged.

A major reason for this discrepancy seems, yet again, the perspective taken by different actors. Is the concept of different realities of e-government taking another round (Marton, 1994; Mol, 2002)? E-government is the idea of putting public services online. This implies that they are provided in a new way. Government is, in effect, being made accessible differently. If the term was always applied identically, a dialectic would probably not exist. However, randomly reading through several policy documents, I could see that the focus quite often drifts towards technological characteristics. In other words, e-government is mostly understood as information technology. This is clearly visible in recurring demands for standardized IT skills and training. Lacking those skills, employees are said to underperform and not keep up with the development (Capgemini, 2004; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Asian Development Bank Institute, 2004). What follows is that the original idea of doing government differently is clouded and ICT becomes a primary focus. Klaus's and my other contacts' work practices, thus, inevitably collide with a goal that they consider to be only a tool.

In this paper my attempt is to look at how e-government functions. It is the real life, the daily particularities in an administration that matter. Whether it is Klaus, his colleagues at the health insurance or the two employees at the state department, technology is not the driving element of their specific version of e-government (Leitner, 2006). Because e-government and its technologies are often communicated as one and the same, both are interpreted as not being of particular importance to their jobs. Back in the days, Klaus collected customer forms directly and in face-to-face interaction. He had a piece of paper in his hands and had to physically carry it upstairs and into his office. He had to go to a shelf, search for the file of the customer, take it out and put the

new form in. When he had questions, he had to go out of his office again, maybe one or two floors up or down to another department and see if someone is there to answer. It was physical activities that made up a large part of his work practice. What is different now? For Klaus, e-government implies to do essentially the same, just less physical. He receives forms online instead of having a conversation with the customer. At best, they talk on the phone. There are no files, but a computer mouse in his hands. There are no shelves, but a digital catalogue. However, at the end of the day, his work remains largely the same.

The problem is, though, that this is not e-government as it is supposed to be. When a proper distinction is made between the general term and the tool to realize this goal, it is about doing a different kind of government. Tidd et al. (2005), among others, use the famous concept by Lewis Elton when talking about change processes and argue that there is an important difference between doing things better and doing better things. In the context of this study, all work practices show a clear tendency towards doing things better. Old practices are done in new ways instead of doing essentially new things. A vivid picture of this is the cataloguing example in chapter 6.1. While my interview partners at the state department now have to catalogue every document, they also have to think of keywords for each document. The whole task is regarded time-consuming and quite ineffective. Indeed, this way of working seems strenuous. But more importantly, despite the application of what they understand to be e-government, the old practices remain unchanged. Here we find a vivid image of how the idea of a new way of doing government is considered from within old frames. This misinterpretation of what is “new” is one of the dangers when it comes to change processes (Czarniawska, 2002). In my present case examples it is quite clear that e-government, equated mostly with technological processes, is seen as a new means of work. But, and this is true for all staff except parts of the IT department, it is not new work. As a consequence, they apply their habitual knowledge and behavior (Bourdieu, 1993) and lastly do the same job as before.

So, is it their fault? Is it their love for routines and fear of change? Not necessarily so. As I have pointed out before, it often is a misunderstanding of what e-government should be. Because strong associations are made with ICT in general, and this could be seen as the policy makers’ fault, several levels of understanding mix. E-government is mostly associated with technology. At the same time, it is quite often communicated as a goal. The translations that are made into the context of daily work

practices, thus, diverge from what is actually intended. Klaus and the others, and most of all top management employees, need to get a better understanding of the fact that the trend is not only about applying new practices to routine jobs. It is a new kind of work. Seen from this perspective, the cataloguing example does not become any more useful. But that is because it is an old practice in a new dress. It may, hence, be necessary to refocus e-government and communicate it as a new form of government. Practices change and so do their goals.

8. Concluding Remarks

I am sitting in the office of the consultancy that I have been working with since the beginning of the study. One of my bosses is discussing some of the observations made during the fieldwork. He is interested in the cultural approach. Most of the time, he argues, administrations are only partially interested in these things. Major issues today revolve around finances, efficiency, laws and customer relations. E-government is one vision to combine them all. With e-government a lot is supposed to change, more democracy, faster administrations, slimmer hierarchies etc. I am thinking, obviously, a lot of expectations are put into this little word and maybe that is the reason why vision and reality are often out of sync.

Having and doing e-government is different, especially in the administration itself. But as I could experience throughout my study, this is not necessarily caused by a gap between vision and reality per se. What e-government is supposed to achieve is possible. However, one of the most underestimated aspects about such a vast notion is its cultural take. By culture I do not mean the culture of Germany or any other country. It is the culture of the individual, the culture of Klaus versus the culture of the people he works with, the culture of IT departments versus the culture of call-center agents. The relativity of the term became quite clear to me. For some it is a goal of their daily work, while for others, and this is the vast majority, it is a tool, a daily means. Unfortunately, my research suggests that e-government is mostly associated with the former and as a technological development. The majority of actual users is, thus, ignored.

Apart from the relativity of the term e-government, other aspects open the dialectic gap too. One of them is trust. Public services provide a safe nest compared to private institutions. A relatively safe employment and the knowledge that customers will not disappear, create an atmosphere of calmness and reassurance that change is not necessary. It took me by surprise how much this trust is a catalyst for maintaining hierarchies. The power structures of bureaucracy are prone to prevent change. The habits acquired in many years of work are hardly changed when public services suggest that these can be kept without any disadvantages.

What does all this mean for the future of e-government? In order to achieve better implementation and understanding, my fieldwork suggests several approaches. The notion e-government must loose some of its technological characteristic. It is perceived as a new means of work, a new tool in the box instead of completely doing new things. This must not be misinterpreted. Change is favorable, but it should focus on the how to improve the way to a goal and not changing the entire organization. Policies may, therefore, refocus with regard to doing better things than giving the impression to do things better is enough.

Before everything is thoughtlessly changed, it should be understood that not everything that looks potentially old-fashioned is already negative. When public services have become islands of autonomy and departments do their own thing, this must have a reason. Individual competences cannot be standardized. Not everyone can or should acquire extensive IT skills. As it turned out in the study, autonomy is an essential and empowering element that gives individuals a meaning of relevance to the system. So why not keep islands of autonomy and, instead, connect them to each other?

In general, public services should not only look outside for suggestions when introducing e-government. Especially in digitization it becomes obvious that the notion of customers is highly relative. Who are they? Just few employees are, in fact, IT proficient. And even though this is seen as an impediment to successful e-government, I doubt that. Due to the fact that the majority of public servants will most likely use e-government merely on a basic level customers can be found inside the organization too. This is unproblematic, because extensive skills are unnecessary. Taking this into account, staff should have access to the same help and support mechanisms like external customers. Why not, for example, introduce Web 2.0 platforms for the staff as well? With a database or any other kind of platform for mutual exchange the employees

would still keep their individual autonomy, but, at the same time, participation and mutual help can increase.

Lastly, concepts of trust and routines need to be redefined. I have discussed how trust in the public system potentially strengthens the maintenance of routines. These routines can be highly beneficial. Most of them are markers of great efficiency and competence. Why not capitalize on this? Just take the exemplary routine of call-center agents, without reflection, calling for help in technological matters. Upon closer inspection, the routine turns out to be a highly effective work sharing system, where everyone sticks to what they can do best. If this example was extrapolated, the beneficial aspects of a particular routine can be identified and harnessed.

Whether e-government is eventually just a fashion will have to be seen. However, what is clear is that it cannot simply be taken out of one context and put into another. Translation is necessary. Considering particular work cultures lies at the heart of any administrative change. Whether e-government is trendy or not, *one size fits all* never succeeds. Lastly, the most important factor is always to find a fashion that best suits one's individual needs.

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