

A man with a mustache and glasses, wearing a dark suit and a patterned tie, is gesturing with his right hand. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a blurred office setting with windows.

Evolving New Delhi into an e-city requires reaching out to citizens in more ways than one. Prakash Kumar, Secretary IT, Delhi government, is rounding up support.

CAPITAL GAIN

Despite setbacks, a pessimistic populace, and an obstinate government, **Prakash Kumar, Secretary IT, Delhi, is marching New Delhi towards its future as an e-city.** Accepting past failure, Kumar crossed over from the government's camp and stepped into a citizen's shoes, creating allegiance to the e-city vision across various stakeholder groups.

BY RAHUL NEEL MANI

CIO: In what sense is New Delhi going to be an e-city? Can you give examples of what's already been done towards this end?

PRAKASH KUMAR: Turning Delhi into an e-city where citizens can interact with the government electronically has been one of the chief minister's long-standing dreams. Barring services which require physical presence, we mean to offer our citizens public services using electronic means. Some of the more basic services include obtaining birth and death certificates, registering for property, applying for a government job, etc.

Two years ago, the Delhi government attempted to provide 11 different services online. Unfortunately, it wasn't very successful mainly because few citizens believed government-related work could be done online.

Like e-Seva (Andhra Pradesh's shared-services initiatives), the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has started providing services electronically from 34 centers. We are going to scale this up to 134 centers and, more importantly, bring all services, from various departments, under one umbrella.

Before we can achieve this, we need to populate our intranet with data. Without accurate databases, it's not possible to provide quick services. We started this process of creating databases with the transport department. Today, 93 departments use their websites to share information with citizens.

What are your infrastructure requirements to set up these centers?

▣ The beauty of this project is that the government doesn't have a large financial stake in it. It is driven

though public-private partnership. The Transport department has offered services using the same model over the last eight years, as have the *Sugam Kendras* (citizen service centers set up by the MCD).

We are responsible for building various application software and ensuring their security. For instance, the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) service, which includes a bill payment application on its website, is undergoing severe third-party testing. We are doing as much as we can at this stage to ensure that the system works smoothly.

What roadblocks do you expect to hit and how will you get around them?

▣ One of our biggest challenges is a public lack of access. We only see a 10 to 15 percent PC and Internet penetration in Delhi. We can put up any number of applications on the web, but 85 percent of people can't access them.

To sidestep this problem, we plan to construct an information kiosk in each ward by the end of 2006. We have already procured space for the kiosks and have placed orders for equipment.

On another level, a lack of dissemination of information worried us. How could we make it convenient for people who did not have Internet access to learn more about our kiosks and their services? We initiated a call center project to help people understand the uses of the kiosks.

Among our more immediate challenges is making a large number of services easily available to people. Initially we plan to get five departments on board. Once we've ironed out their problems we will bring on the next five, and so on. We are wary of over-extending ourselves.

Interview | Prakash Kumar

Demand will only come with quality of service. If all proceeds well, we have plans to use these sites to promote public events.

Simultaneously, it's important to create revenue while keeping the services affordable. Vendors who put up infrastructure get paid on a per transaction basis. We've seen people don't mind paying a little extra for good services. The property tax services, for example, are very popular.

Soon, we will persuade agencies like the DJB to have offer services. The DJB, which has various applications on its site, does over 60 lakh transactions a year. We see a definite return on investment, if we were to charge Rs 5 per transaction. Today we don't offer such services, but once we start, the number users will be very high.

How is the call center helping the e-city project?

▣ We want the call center to assist the project by tracking the status of requests. The call center can be contacted using a ten-digit toll-free number and by SMS.

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▣ The call center also serves to manage grievances. Today, every department handles its grievances separately. Also, they do not have a system to track how much time is taken to solve an issue. The call centre is responsible for gathering complaints and recording them on a system — one that has tools to address and escalate the problem.

Looking forward, after this exercise, we will prepare a 'dashboard' for leaders in the government to watch the status of public problems being solved. It's similar to what's been implemented by the 911 services in the US government.

Will you have a master database of citizens that government departments can share?

▣ A project is underway to build such a database. The idea is to make sure that one change reflects across all



departments so that citizens don't have to visit each department.

The project is at the RFP (Request For Proposal) stage. Fifteen vendors have shown interest and have submitted their proposals. The departments that will benefit are those that handle ration cards, election cards, birth and death registration, and transport.

All this will take another couple of years, but the immediate idea is to have a combined database and share it among various departments.

How is accountability allocated for these projects?

▣ This is the trickiest part of any e-governance project. The department of IT doesn't drive these projects; we just facilitate

the whole process. Ownership must be taken by respective departments and agencies. The more progressive departments take ownership of both project deployment and change management.

The moment we start driving a project, it loses steam. Unless there is buy-in from within, no system can help. From experience, the moment we move out of such a project, it is abandoned.

Has the Right to Information Act helped in making e-governance effective?

▣ Delhi was one of the first few states to jump on the bandwagon to have its own Right to Information Act. So far, over 10,000 people have used the Act effectively. Half of these have used it to redress personal grievances. Thirteen percent have sought information on policy matters and the remaining have used it to gather information on community-based issues.

All Public Information Officers (representatives from various departments who interface with the public) have been trained to use our applications to help citizens with information. But this system is still not seeing optimal use. IT is a great tool to put information in the public domain. It definitely takes a lot of effort but if at the end of the day citizens receive benefits, it's worth it. **CIO**

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