Summary reports

Transforming Parliaments webinar series

July 2022

2022

23 May 2022, Parliaments and the cloud

On 23 May, the Open Data and IT Governance hubs of the IPU Centre for Innovation in Parliament organized a Transforming Parliaments webinar (watch here) about parliaments and the cloud. There were over 60 participants, including senior IT staff from national parliaments. The webinar examined why and how an increasing number of parliaments are storing their parliamentary information and documentation in the cloud.

Case studies were presented by the House of Commons of Canada, the Parliament of Finland, the Houses of the Oireachtas (Ireland), and the Pan-African Parliament. Each elaborated on how the transition is happening, from in-house ICT systems to cloud platforms and providers for storing parliamentary data. They presented cloud adoption strategies and roadmaps designed to overcome obstacles on the legal and data protection fronts, internal parliamentary policies and processes, and ICT skills and competencies to manage and work with systems and data in the cloud.

The meeting produced several recommendations that will be useful for parliaments starting on this path. These included:

1. the need to take small steps towards the cloud, perhaps using pilot projects that allow for learning by doing;
2. going for a multi-cloud approach to be less reliant on a single cloud provider or platform; and
3. leveraging partnerships with cloud providers who are often keen to provide technical support and help develop internal skills.

Finally, the experts agreed that parliaments needed to adapt their procurement processes to allow for more operational-type expenses. This would be more suited to monthly and annual cloud subscriptions, rather than the more traditional ICT focus on capital expenditure for procurement.

8 June 2022, Cybersecurity

The Open Data and IT Governance hubs of the Centre for Innovation in Parliament organized a closed webinar on cybersecurity in parliaments. This was a chance for an invited audience to hear from experts in a number of parliaments, and to discuss current challenges in today's cybersecurity environment. Participants explored how the COVID-19 pandemic not only changed the way they worked but changed their security requirements. As more systems went online, both the internal management requirements and the risk profile of the parliament changed. Parliaments have become more reliant on cloud-based systems and Software as a Service. Many parliaments have seen significant increases in demand for remote access to parliamentary servers.

Like other public institutions, parliaments have seen a rise in cyberattacks, and the risks are greater than ever. However, recruiting and retaining qualified security staff is challenging. Internally, parliaments are developing strategies to increase user awareness, develop training and support packages for members and staff, and proactively monitor activity to identify security risks and potential breaches.

It was clear from the parliaments taking part in the webinar that cybersecurity is an ongoing and significant concern. Parliaments need to review internal support, and update service level agreements with service providers.

A key lesson from COVID-19 has been the need to plan better for unforeseen events, and recognize that previous security and business continuity planning strategies were often found wanting at the start of the pandemic. One tangible recommendation from the webinar is for parliaments to look at their own national cybersecurity guidelines, and work with government agencies in this field to better manage and mitigate the risks.

2021

18 October 2021, Data – making parliamentary data more accessible

This first webinar looked at how parliaments can make their data more accessible, and included presentations and discussion from the Chambers of Deputies of Argentina and Brazil, the UK Parliament and the European Parliament. The key takeaways from this webinar (watch here) were:

What types of parliamentary open data can be available to promote transparency and citizen engagement? A typical modern open data portal contains data on members and their legislative activity, political parties, blocs and affiliations, committee activity (and member activity within), legislative proposals in front of parliament, plenary session data including member attendance, participation and voting records. Information on parliamentary diplomacy, staffing, salaries, expenses and organization is also seen.

What are the important pillars of a parliamentary open data project? At the highest level, there must be a data strategy and a data governance framework in the form of an endorsed strategic orientation for open data, followed by clear open data guiding principles. To improve data openness, there should be (a) an open licence for data, (b) three-star data as a minimum, or a target to achieve that, (c) an open data portal to provide access, and (d) a communication strategy to promote outreach.

What can parliaments do to promote a better understanding of open data and its value, both within parliament and outside? Internally, articles on open data can be published in newsletters, meetings can be held with data-minded people from different departments, and training can be organized for staff on data topics. Externally, exchanges can be promoted with other institutions, and parliament can take part in national or international open data events, such as hackathons.

Figure: Rating of parliamentary data formats. (credit: Reet Sommer, DG ITEC, European Parliament)

How can parliamentary transparency become a success with open data? Parliaments that produce open data need to listen to those who are interested in it, and understand the questions that open data users in society have, how they are willing to access the data, and what end users do not understand about the data, so as to improve any accompanying information.
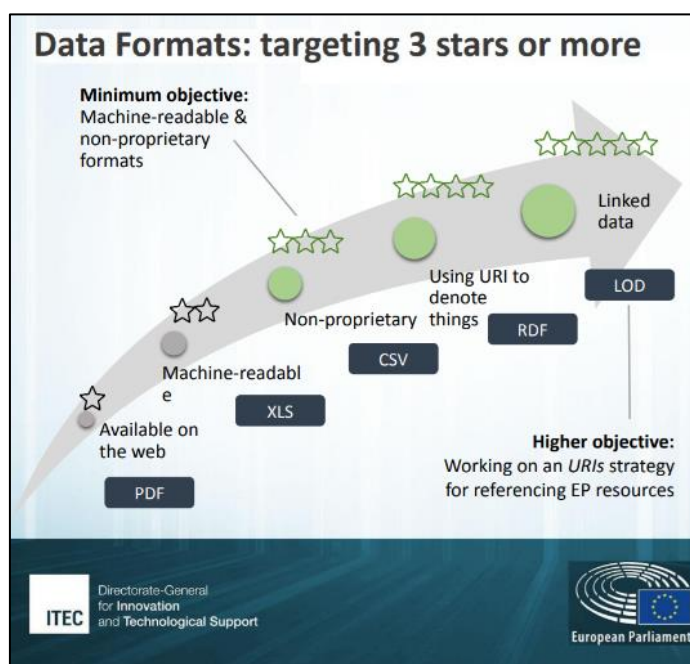
8 November 2021, Governance – measuring the performance of the parliament through KPIs

The second webinar in the series looked at how parliaments can measure institutional performance through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and included presentations and discussion from the Parliament of South Africa and the European Parliament. The key takeaways from this webinar (watch here) were:

How are performance indicators developed?
Performance indicators are a way of directly linking operational activities to a parliament's strategic goals. The Parliament of South Africa gave an example of how they develop performance indicators and link these through the entire strategic life cycle of the parliament. The Parliament's strategy map provides specific objectives over time. These are linked to

Figure: Strategic indicators as input for performance measurement. Credit: Parliament of South Africa

services. For each service, targets are set, which translate into a performance indicator. Measuring these indicators becomes part of the strategic planning, monitoring and reporting cycle.
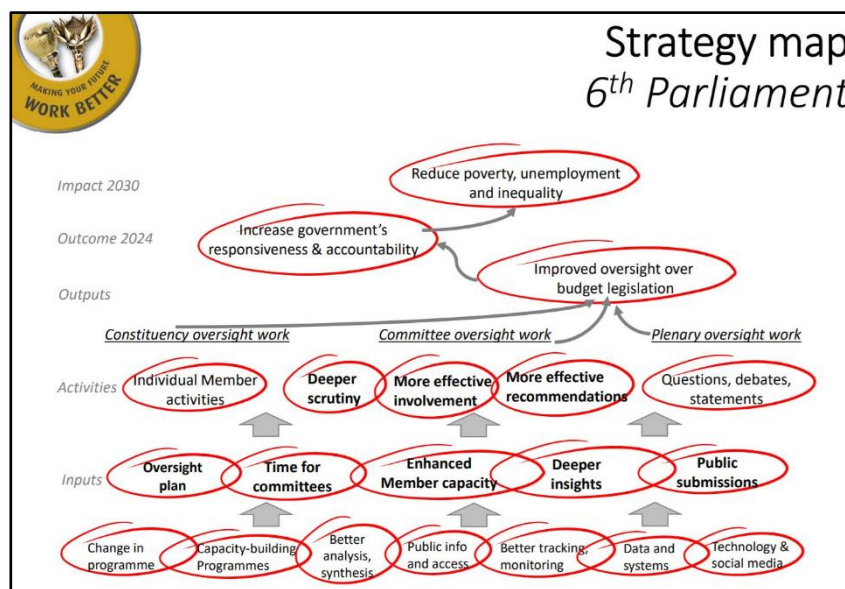
How can performance be measured?
Services that are available to members, such as ICT, facilities management, research, procedural and advice services, and committee support services, can be assessed across a number of dimensions. These can include such metrics as: ease of access, timeliness, reliability, fairness, and usefulness. Measurement can take place through easy and accessible staff and member satisfaction surveys.

How to engage the entire organization in performance measurement?
Performance measurement is a culture change for many parliaments. The support of a parliament's leadership in raising the profile and importance of performance measurement is one key success factor. From there, the cultural acceptance of measurement as part of what parliament does has to cascade downwards from the institutional level, through the divisions, to unit level. To have people take part in performance measurement, they need to understand not only what they must do but, more importantly, their work's purpose and value to the parliament. Regular consultations and roadshows are part of delivering this message, a key aspect of which is that it is always the performance of activities that is being measured, and not that of individual staff members.

16 November 2021, Hybrid meetings – remote voting apps

The third webinar looked at the emergence of hybrid meetings and remote voting apps during the pandemic. Featuring contributions from the UK Parliament, the National Assembly of Zambia, and the Chambers of Deputies of Brazil and Argentina, the webinar (watch here) answered many questions on:

Bringing new solutions to members

Members have been faced with a lot of technological (and procedural) change over the last 18 months, and this has taught parliaments lessons about how to better deploy and support new applications. The parliaments presenting in this session found that deployment often required a three-pronged communication and support effort that included:
1) providing e-tutorials and guidelines;
2) working intensively with members' offices and staff; and
3) providing members with an exclusive hotline and helpdesk for the remote voting app.

Figure: Remote voting features of the InfoLeg app.
Credit: Chamber of Deputies, Brazil

Security of voting

The unimpeachable veracity of voting is of vital importance to members. Therefore, the reliability of any system in terms of accuracy and security is paramount. Where multifactor authentication, including using biometric data (via finger or thumbprint readers on devices), is deployed, it is seen as sufficient to ensure that members themselves, rather than someone else, are the ones voting. Security practices could further be enhanced by collaborating with national cybersecurity institutions and following the recommendations of public sector agencies.

Agile working practices

As timelines were short and pressure high to restore a working parliament, traditional software development methods were not an option, because they usually involve lengthy requirements gathering, procurement and system development stages. Agile methods have emerged over the last twenty years or so. They offer an alternative way of developing and deploying systems in a more iterative manner that focuses more directly on user needs. The parliaments in this webinar talked about how they had pivoted their development practices to take advantage of agile methods. This allowed them to deploy a minimum viable product, and then iteratively evolve and incrementally expand this offering over a relatively short period. As well as allowing for a more rapid and flexible deployment of applications to users, this method had the advantage of keeping technical staff closer to the users.
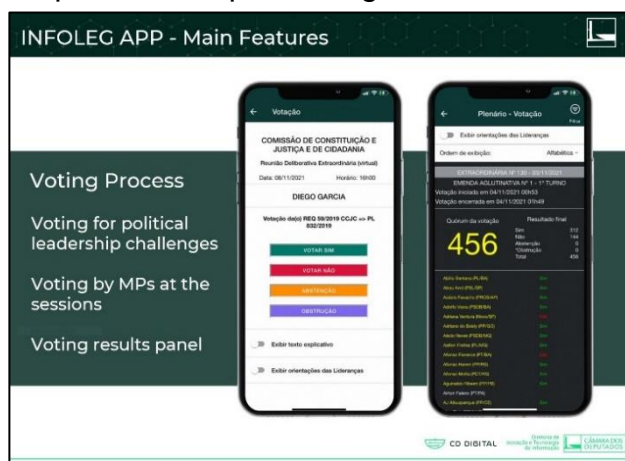
Regional and global networking between parliaments
The participants talked about how having strong regional and global links with other parliaments was life-saving during the pandemic. Parliamentary business and IT solutions are by nature very niche, and the IT market lagged behind in providing the bespoke solutions that parliaments needed. The best way for parliaments to find meaningful and relevant answers quickly was often through their connections with other parliaments.

29 November 2021. Governance – building a digital strategy

Of this fourth webinar a video recording is available which can be accessed here.

Contact

If you would like to learn more about this webinar and the projects and/or speakers presented, please contact us on innovation@ipu.org.