

THE NETHERLANDS: PORTALS

Introduction

Status

Since 1999 there is a single portal to Dutch government (www.overheid.nl), which was upgraded in January 2001. This central portal is intended, first and foremost, as an access site: all governmental organisations must be presented on the central portal in lists categorized according to subject or type of organisation. The subject-based overviews list organisations concerned with specific issues, like 'education' or 'nature and environment'. Organisation-based overviews list all municipal, provincial, ministerial and other authorities. Also there is a list of all Internet-based discussions available. Any topic-specific portals are accessed via the central portal (f.i. www.nietafwachten.nl on waiting lists in health institutions; www.interwad.nl with integrated information on one of the Netherlands biggest nature reserve (also in English), www.rechtspraak.nl with updated judicial information and www.ilv.nl on integrated public safety policies).

Besides the access function, the portal seeks to serve as a source of information. The most important content on the web site itself are all official documents of the Dutch parliament and official announcements from the national government publications. This function was upgraded by the launch of a new version of the portal in January 2001. Users can now enter any of the following profiles: 'general public', entrepreneurs and organisations', civil servants and politicians' and 'free search'. After entering a profile, users can submit their postal code or city of residence. By doing this, they will receive governmental information of specific interest to their profile and postal district or city of residence. Users can now directly enter requests for information about such topics as housing and development in their own municipality, the fire department, the police and judicial authorities and even libraries and municipal authorities. In this sense the second version of the portal is more demand-driven than the first version.

Visions and targets

The Netherlands has some 1600 government organisations, ranging from ministries at the national level down to local authorities. In addition there are many government-associated organisations, such as universities, libraries, museums and (health)care institutions. By the end of 2003 all 1600 organisations will be presented on the internet with a website and thus accessible via the central portal. Currently there are around 900 hyperlinks to governmental organisations. By the end of 2003 it is aimed to increase this to 2500 - 3000 hyperlinks. The website will be developed further.

A major innovation is the development of an electronic catalogue with a larger number of government products and services. The integration of this catalogue into their websites makes it easier for small communities to present a qualitatively attractive website. This demand-oriented catalogue will direct the visitor simply and quickly from the portal website through to the website of the government organisation responsible for providing the required product.

In the course of 2002 all national and local legislation will be presented in consolidated form via the central portal. This means that it will be more than a bare summary of publications of new and amended legislation; in fact, changes to existing legislation will be processed to form a cohesive text integrating existing and new texts. This will result in an

enormous enrichment of the website's content. Besides a range of other products are also in preparation, such as a 'my government.nl' facility.

National strategy

An important part of the national strategy about e-government is access to and accessibility of all government information to create a more balanced relationship between citizen and government. The Government Information Act serves as the main basis for this policy. The national strategy is not limited to the national level, but includes all levels of government, i.e. local and regional authorities as well. As the Netherlands is a decentralised country with a strong independence for the municipalities, central government has little means to force other governmental organisations to go online and improve their sites and thus enhance the function of the central portal. The national portal strategy is particularly carried out by stimulating all government organisations.

Comments on the definition

The suggested definition seems appropriate. The only omission is that it is not clear if all information is strictly government information. The definition assumes that the information and services come from different, independent suppliers. Are these also businesses, pressure groups or societal organisations? The Dutch portal is now limited to information and services from governmental bodies, but it seems realistic that in short time it will also have link to information from other bodies about societal or political subjects.

Drivers of change - driving force, incentives, and means

User orientation

The launch of the second version of the website was preceded by a limited study to evaluate user satisfaction with the approach and the response speeds to a number of practical questions. The new version scored very highly on both aspects. In order to catch grasp of users' further expectations and needs regarding the portal, an extensive study will feature its results in October 2001. These will be taken into account in the future development of the portal. One of the most prominent lessons has been that little user surveys have been conducted until now.

Other incentives

In order to stimulate governmental organisations to go online, to improve their sites and thus improve the quality and usefulness of the central portal, a special programme agency has been installed. This agency issues quality guidelines and models for f.i. privacy statements or e-mail handling protocols. The agency functions as a helpdesk that stands aside organisations with help and advice on all aspects, including contents, technology and structure. The agency also runs a continuous Internet Monitor. It calculates increases in websites and assesses the quality of both the contents and the technology applied. The research reports are published on the internet, also with the aim of peer-pressure. The quality directive for government websites serves as the basic guideline for assessment and is established in consultation with various government bodies. There is also an annual Award as a continuous incentive to improve quality on government websites. An affiliated website, www.webwijzer.net presents examples of excellence in various areas.

Every year subsidies are made available; this year there are subsidies for local governmental bodies that plan to implement a centrally developed service catalogue into their existing websites. Of around 530 municipalities, 315 have been granted a subsidy.

Dutch government is working on a electronic signature and a PKI infrastructure. The availability of these techniques together with the availability of a complete package of digital information and services supplied by the responsible governmental organizations is expected to boost the possibilities of the portal to become more customer oriented. Moreover in the future, a new civil right on accessibility of government information may be introduced. That means that the idea of freedom of, in any case, governmental information will be constitutionally founded. Accessibility of government information will thereby be even better guaranteed. Also this right extends the scope from governmental documents (as in the Government Information Act) to governmental information (which may also mean databases).

Until now there are no joint projects with the private sector, but this will probably change within the next few years.

Visits to www.overheid.nl are made about 10.000 times a day. An obstacle to more extensive use of the governmental portal by professionals and citizens is the digital divide. Also the lack of capability to search for, combine and understand governmental information functions as an impediment to the logical integration of the central governmental portal into people's searches for information.

Portals - future development and challenges

Special usergroups

Access to the information society is a right for every citizen, so also for the handicapped, is seen as a challenge for the future. There are international guidelines (W3C) for the construction of accessible sites, but they are still complicated. A simple version is necessary in order to promote their application. In addition, practical support is required from webmasters and webbuilders. Government authorities will have to take the lead in this respect and set a good example. In the Netherlands a national campaign started this year, entitled Remove the Thresholds. The first aim of the project is to put the theme of website accessibility for the handicapped so firmly on the public agenda that every provider of Internet sites takes account of it. The second aim is to bring the possibilities of the internet as far as possible to the attention of the handicapped or to convince their parents/caretakers of the importance of the handicapped using the internet.

The central portal can be considered as a central front office. Since this year there is also a government intranet, which functions as a central back office for the national government. In due time other government organisations will also be involved. The intranet does not function, as in the UK, as a basis for the central portal. It is meant for civil servants to accommodate working in projectgroups and interdepartmental groups.

Applying metadata criteria

Guidelines or requirements for quality of content on government websites are mentioned under the head 'other incentives'. There are no guidelines or requirements for informations

structures or information meta labelling. But there are guidelines for acces for the handicapped (see the information above).

Future challenges

As a sequel of the questions asked in this template it could be useful to gather some quantitative indicators on central government portals, such as:

- what percentage of government organisations is accessible via the portal on (1) national, regional (2) or local (3) level or other governmental bodies (4)?
- what percentage is accessible via the portal of information services (1), interactional services (2), or advanced transactional services (3), i.e. services that requires security, digital signatures etc.
- what percentage of national (1) or local (2) legislation is presented in consolidated form via the central portal?
- Is the portal government-funded, or is there a public private partnership?
- Is anything known on the use of the portal, f.e. the background of users, the quantity of use, which particular parts are used how often and for what purposes?
- what kind of functionalities does the portal offer?