

Swedish Agency for Public Management
Public Governance
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Country Report from Sweden for the GOL Portals Project Government On-Line International Network

1 Introduction

This report is the Swedish input to the portals sub-project within the Government On-Line International Network (GOL for short). To be more precise, the report is organised according to GOL's Template for Country Reports on Portals (see <http://governments-online.org/articles/13.shtml>).

1.1 Establishing a top node portal

In 1994, the Ministry of Finance initiated the Top Managers Forum, consisting of some 15 heads of (i) State Agencies, (ii) the Swedish Association of Local Authorities¹, and (iii) the Swedish Federation of County Councils, respectively. One of its very first projects was entitled *World Wide Web for Public Information*, which in 1996 published a Handbook on Web Publication, and a report suggesting that the three sectors (Central Government, County Councils, and Local Authorities) should develop a joint Web site, the SwedenDirect (SverigeDirekt). It was also proposed that the handbook *Community Guide* should be made available in a Web version. These proposals came to fruition in 1997 in the form of a project on a year-to-year budget. It was a co-operative project between the Riksdag (Swedish parliament), the Government, the Swedish Federation of County Councils and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities.

Sweden hereby came to launch a public sector Top Portal starting a citizen centred information system. The latter eventually was transformed according to a life cycle model.

¹ *Authority*, as in Public Authority, is oftentimes used in the international literature in situation where a Swedish translator would use the word *Agency*. In Sweden, we talk about Central Government Agencies (i.e., State Agencies), Regional Government Agencies, and Local Government Agencies. When used in isolation, Agency tends to stand for State Agency.

The SwedenDirect portal has proved itself useful and so, as of 1 July 2000, the SwedenDirect organisation is a committee attached to the Prime Minister's Office. The committee has two tasks: to update and edit the contents of the Web site, and to propose a suitable institutional structure for SwedenDirect in the future.

Today, SwedenDirect (www.sverigedirekt.gov.se/) is the official Web portal for information about Sweden's public sector. You can search for information by topic and key word, in alphabetical order, or by ministry. You do not need to know which authority handles your question, SwedenDirect will guide you. The search engine is tailored to enable visitors to search for information exclusively on Swedish public sector Web sites. It is possible to narrow the search further to a specific Web site or a certain type of Web site. For example, you can narrow your search down to all government authorities or to one or all municipalities.

1.2 National strategies

When it comes to national strategies, be it for portals or any other concrete solutions, the Swedish approach must be characterised as 'light touch', which to a high degree is a corollary of the overall picture of the public administration. At the national level, Sweden's 8.9 million inhabitants have at their disposal some 280 highly independent agencies (employing 225 000 people) and 11 small ministries (employing 3000). Additional factors are that all decisions by the Government Cabinet are made collectively, and that there is a culture of compromise and consensus derived from decades of minority or coalition governments.

Oftentimes, the Cabinet (or a ministry) suggests solutions, but stop short of expressing any normative views. Instead, the Cabinet spells out that it is the duty of all state agencies to serve their respective constituencies well -- which, for example, may mean that portals should be seriously considered by each individual agency. This will be further discussed in section 2 below.

1.3 On the definition of a portal

The letter accompanying GOL's Template for Country Reports on Portals, the following framework portal definition was proposed:

A government portal may be considered to be a dedicated service that co-ordinates and presents information and services from different, independent suppliers into one interface, typically a web site. The information is categorised in accordance with given criteria, like topics, geography, or other subjects related to the users' needs.

The heading "National Portals" at the U.S. National Top Portal (<http://www.firstgov.gov/>) is a link to 'national portals' around the world.

The Swedish entry consists of some 550 Web sites from public sector institutions, primarily agencies at the central, regional and local levels, respectively. That seems to imply that every *Home Page* of an institution counts as a *Portal*.

In Sweden we are busily establishing portals, yet we do not have a definition of a portal.

SwedenDirect has a section entitled *Portals providing societal information*, which has the following sub-sections:

- The Community Guide (N = 1)
- Portals with regional content (N = 11)
- Portals tailored to specific topics (N = 18)
- Web sites in support of themes and campaigns (N = 42)

Feasibility studies and implementations are underway for several more portals.

In general, it can be observed that:

- 1) Portal stands for Internet portal, which stands for Web site portal (which stands for Web site?).
- 2) There are portals acting like regular books and which likewise are structured by means of chapters.
- 3) There are portals, which, like regular shops, are services endpoints.
- 4) There are portals, which provide nothing but Web based special functions/intelligence (search engine, translation, simulation, parsing, etc.).
- 5) There are Web portals, the sole functions of which are to provide a structured list of links to other Web sites.
- 6) There are portals which are value added service providers (for signatures, etc.).
- 7) There are portals acting as front-ends to databases.
- 8) There are (soon) portals capable of providing intergovernmental services, which may make them function like ad hoc Virtual Public Authorities.

A *physical* portal is a more or less ornamented entrances to a building hosting say a Public Services Entity, and so the Web site acting as an entrance to the digital information sphere of said Public Services Entity would be a *electronic* Public Services Portal.

A portal can be seen as dedicated service function, a resource concentrator of sorts. When a portal is being established, this can be seen as an allocation of resources. It is not an act of outsourcing, nor is it an insourcing. It is a new breed of Application Services Provision.

With reference to the list below, the more functions are sourced to a Web site, the more likely is the Web site to be recognised as a portal:

- A Web site containing the time table for one single local bus route.
- A Web site containing all the public transportation time tables of a city.
- A Web site providing consumer advice on purchasing used cars.
- A Web site for booking driving licence exams.
- A Web site with live videos from notorious traffic congestion spots.
- A Web site helping you find the most 'green' driving route from A to B.
- A Web site serving as the base for a network of victims of drunken drivers.
- A Web site for downloading the Taxi Driver's Tax Declaration Forms Package.
- A Web site selling a smart e-Access to the free of charge National Road Database.
- A Web site acting as a one-stop shop for starting a transportation business.
- A Web site showing e-Learning videos on Customs Export Licence Procedures.
- A Web site with a stand-by anonymous peer expert panel on the design of portals.

2 Drivers of Change – Driving forces, Incentives, and Means

There are several legally binding documents regulating the interactions between Public Authorities and citizens and businesses. With regard to portals as a means to better serve citizens and businesses, the status was on July 20, 2000 codified by the Government into *Public Administration in the Service of Democracy —an Action Programme* (<http://justitie.regeringen.se/inenglish/pdf/publicadministration.pdf>).

The action programme recapitulates that "an electronic channel that is as comprehensive as possible, SwedenDirect, based partially on life and business situations, has been developed. This, combined with more specialised electronic means of access, 'portals', is intended to facilitate dealings with citizens and companies."

The action programmes goes on saying that SwedenDirect can be seen as a component of the Information Society Infrastructure, and that it is the duty of central-government agencies to make use of the infrastructure. Furthermore, this means that central-government agencies should have Internet Web sites of high quality with home pages linked to SwedenDirect. Each agency's home page should rapidly lead to basic facts about the agency and other specialist information of interest to citizens. It should also enable them to submit particulars to the agency and, for example, initiate transactions electronically.

In one instance the action programme is more outspoken on portals, namely with regard to the process of starting a new business:

"To improve the dialogue with future and existing business owners, Internet use is to be developed further through special portal functions that make relevant, situation-oriented official information available to business owners. The purpose of a joint portal on the Internet is to facilitate companies' agency contacts and provide easily accessible and, in terms of content, correct information on relevant subjects. The Government is to be the provider of the portal." The last sentence has been realised in the form of an earmarked budget amendment for the Swedish Business Development Agency to establish and operate said portal.

2.1 User orientation

Already in 1997, in the central government sector there were 105 PCs per 100 civil servants. This is an indication on how thoroughly computerised Swedish Public Authorities are. And by mid 2001 some 75 per cent of the citizens aged 9-79 years had Internet access at home, school or work. Furthermore, the fact that Sweden for the last two years has earned the number one spot on the Information Society Index indicates that Sweden -- in the absence of 'thou shalt' -- is seething of e-enabling actions.

2.1.1 ServiceDialogue

The aforementioned action programme does act as a general trigger, support, and accelerator, with regard to the development of portals. The action programme's user orientation has been further stressed in the form of a ServiceDialogue project. As announced on January 19, 2001, about twenty Swedish government agencies have been assigned to participate in this pilot project. Each agency must:

- Develop and publish a Citizens Charter, a service declaration, which gives clear, relevant and binding information about the range of services and the level of service.
- Conduct a continuous and systematic service dialogue with the citizens and businesses. Establish internal processes for dealing with complaints. Perform customer surveys and citizens consultations. Use modern ICT for these purposes.
- Integrate the views of the citizens and businesses in the business development.

The pilot project will run for two years. The Swedish Agency for Public Management will, in co-operation with The National Council for Quality and Development, co-ordinate the project.

2.1.2 Open Sweden

“To encourage the free exchange of opinion and availability of comprehensive information, every Swedish citizen shall be entitled to have free access to official documents.” This is how the Swedish right of public access principle is formulated in the Freedom of the Press Act in the chapter entitled On the public nature of official documents. The right of public access principle is a long-standing tradition in Sweden, and although absolute Kings regarded the State’s documents as their private ones the principle of public access was enshrined in the legal system at general assembly, or ‘ting’, even in the Middle Ages,. The dependency of freedom of the press on public access was laid down in the 1776 Freedom of the Press Act.

However, clear signals from the general public, journalists, trade unions, and professional organisations, indicate that inadequacies do exist in terms of knowledge about the public access to information principle, and with respect to its application. Examples of such inadequacies in the part of the Agencies include delays in connection with the release of official documents, improper invocations of secrecy, and cases where employees do not feel at liberty to exercise the freedom of expression and communication freedom guaranteed them by law. Many citizens have insufficient knowledge of these rights, making it difficult for those citizens to exercise them.

The Government believes that this type of openness is one of the cornerstones of a democratic society, and that it must continue to be so. Therefore, as a further elaboration on the aforementioned action programme, the Government has initiated the Open Sweden campaign (www.oppnasverige.gov.se/page1/42.html). It is a joint effort involving representatives from the national, municipal and county council levels.

Once more, the Swedish public administration is characterised by autonomy of its institutions, which in principle are free to decide how to design, organise and run their operations. Thus the engagement in the campaign must be voluntary and the institutions are free to set their own goals and decide on actions.

2.1.3 24/7 Agencies

The user centred approach of the SwedenDirect portal, the ServiceDialogue project, and the Open Sweden campaign, are all expressions of the action programme Public Administration in the Service of Democracy. This three-pronged line of action converge into the separate measure termed 24/7 agencies.

Many countries are working on 24/7 services, but Sweden is unique in focussing on 24/7 *Agencies*. By that is meant that the whole agency, and not just separate business lines, should (i) deliver user centred services, (ii) be

an open and democratic authority, (iii) be available independent of time of day and the physical location of the user, (iv) provide service systems and interfaces according to design-for-all principles, and (v) select and implement solutions having regard to the agency being a component in a family of networked public authorities.

The Swedish Agency for Public Management was first commissioned to elaborate the on the 24/7 concept. This resulted in a May 2000 report on *Criteria for 24/7 Agencies in the Networked Public Administration* (www.statskontoret.se/pdf/200041.pdf). The report stresses that to reach the full potential of a 24/7 agency, portals and similar outreach and integrating solutions would have to be employed along with enabling infrastructure (metadata, authentication, secure messaging, etc.).

On June 7, 2001, the Government followed up by commissioning the Swedish Agency for Public Management to further support and stimulate the uptake of the 24/7 Agency concept by acting as a 24/7 coach, advisor and guideline producer. Progress reports are due every sixth months up to the final report by July 30, 2003. Forgoing the 'light touch' approach, the Government herewith stressed that if it is cost-effective to provide e-Information and e-Services, then the agency *shall* act accordingly, yet without compromising the Government's overriding Service For All agenda of the action programme.

2.2 Other incentives

In addition to the measures mentioned in section 2.1, the Government is supporting and to some extent financing certain e-enabling infrastructure measure, which will be a boon to the portal development as a part of the development of the general e-Government thrust. Examples of measures on the e-enabling agenda are:

- 1) Removal of legal barriers and uncertainties,
- 2) Establishing a PKI system,
- 3) Promoting a secure messaging system,
- 4) Working closely with the European Union on a Common Assessment Framework (www.eipa.nl/CAF/Introduction.htm), and
- 5) Dealing with public sector information resources from an information infrastructure perspective ('infostructure,' 'soft infrastructure').

One aspect of the e-government development which is not handled well by the Government's 'light touch', is the development of services involving more than one agency. This has resulted in Government (financial) initiatives for the establishing of portals in support of clusters of agencies; examples are the CultureNet, the EnviroNet, the SchoolNet, and the SMELink.

3 Portals – Future Developments and Challenges

3.1 Status and development

As outlined in section 2.1.3, the Swedish Agency for public Management has been commissioned by the Government to take the lead in the national pursuit for 24/7 agencies, which in the near future most likely will be an important stepping stone for public sector portal development

Working with the central-government agencies, staying in close contact with the regional and local governments, the Swedish Agency for Public Management will most likely deal with the portal issues according to the view that the further development of portals shall follow the old Chinese proverb made famous by Mao Tse Dong: "Let a thousand flowers blossom, and a thousand thoughts compete." Probable pre-conditions are that the development should be demand driven, built on the lowest common denominator of guidelines, and that there shall be no fixed structure except for a 'permanent' official public sector portal.

3.2 The big picture: Yearning for a coherent 'Information Infrastructure'

Sweden has a long and successful history of the development of sectorial 'Basic Databases'. Over the years, agencies involved in these Basic Databases have slowly but surely established various forms of information standards. However, the Internet era has exposed severe shortcomings in the pre-Internet approach and scope.

Labels like electronic management, health on-line, intelligent transports, e-pensions, e-democracy, e-commerce, etc., all express the possibility of delivering or obtaining goods and services via the Web. In many of these cases a number of processes will take place automatically between computers on the Web, as a basis for the service concerned. This requires a 'digital environment' for each field, i.e. the availability in digital form of the information needed for a service, and the existence of necessary system functions.

Having analysed the rapidly escalating demand for a National thrust with regard to an information infrastructure, the Swedish ICT Commission in the Spring of 2001 proposed that the Swedish Government should embark on a multi-pronged approach involving the creation of concrete measures for uniform digital information in the form of pilot projects and precursors in the next development phase of the information society:

- The school system: Infostructure for overview, guidance and interaction for life-long learning.
- Tele-medicine or 'e-Health': Infostructure for interactive care and health care

- administration.
- e-Commerce: Infostructure for market overview, consumer protection and competition.
- The labour market: Infostructure and portal for job seekers and recruiters.
- Cultural heritage: Infostructure for co-ordinated information searching of archives, libraries and museums.
- Tourism and the arts: Calendars containing standardised information about events, conferences etc.
- Environmental information: Initiatives for improved metadata and search functions.

These initiatives can be implemented with or without portals, but the interest in portal applications will no doubt increase the interest in and need for metadata.

As a further indication of the Swedish aspiration for information standards and metadata, the Swedish Standards Institute has called a meeting on September 10, 2001, to establish a working group on Metadata for Documents.

3.3 Examples of metadata in portal applications

The Swedish EnviroNet (smn.environ.se/) presents a good and early example of Swedish metadata work related to portals. EnviroNet consists of a co-operative portal for environmental stakeholders, the steadily growing membership of which as of July 2001 included State agencies (N=22), Counties and regional governments (13), Local governments (16), Research institutes (30), NGOs (31), and Companies (12). In the Environmental Catalogue and Search facilities you will find links to Web documents at the individual members' Web sites. The responsibility for the information recedes with each individual EnviroNet member. In order to create a unified and searchable database of all the local data content, the members are required to meet the Dublin Core metadata standards specified by the EnviroNet.

The National Swedish portal for all legal documents is called '*the LawRoom*' (www.lagrummet.gov.se/) and is an example where conformance to metadata rules have been enforced in minute details. The LawRoom hereby has achieved the status of a transparent one-stop shop for all legal documents produced in the Parliament, the Government Cabinet, and the state agencies (courts, regional governments and local governments will be added in the next rounds). The LawRoom uses a homebrewed Dublin Core, the unofficial name of which is '*the Stockholm Core*'.

The most recent example is '*StudyNow*' (www.studera.nu). This portal became operational in February 2001 and its aim is to provide prospective Swedish students with a one-stop Internet site on higher education

opportunities, as well as information about careers and postgraduate studies. The system is based on co-operation between many organisations, of which institutions of higher education constitute the largest group. The National Board of Student Aid, the National Agency for Services to Universities and University Colleges, and the National Labour Market Board, are other major participants in the project. Information from municipalities and housing companies are examples of contributions from new categories of participants in this student information venture. StudyNow has developed an XML based metadata standard so as to make all higher education courses searchable on a defined set of course information dimensions.

3.4 Quality of content on government Web sites

In establishing the National top portal, SwedenDirect, in 1997, it was decided that a public authority wishing to be linked to, and searchable via, SwedenDirect had better conform to four 'shall' and seven 'should' rules of Web site quality. Today, most Web sites do follow these quality criteria even though there have been no serious enforcement attempts. The Government's thrust on the establishing of 24/7 Agencies (see section 2.1.3) will most likely result in an expanded set of Web quality guidelines, and conformance reports every six months. With regard to the 'design-for-all' dimension, an ordinance spelling out the agencies' information delivery duties is in operation as from September 2001.

3.5 Future (and current) challenges, not least in Sweden

Cost effectiveness. There is no such thing as a free lunch, as the saying goes. If a portal does not provide any value there is no justification for its existence. If a portal does provide value the costs of its development, operation and maintenance will have to be financed (recovered). In Sweden, the National Audit Office has questioned the state agencies' costly knee-jerk reflexes of establishing extensive Web based services just for the sake of being 24/7 enabled. In the U.S., on June 28, 2001, the OMB director on e-government issues proclaimed that federal agencies are "wasting money on 'fad portals,' multiple search engines and efforts to develop 'government-unique' versions of XML for their Web sites." In Sweden, the Government Cabinet has asked The Swedish Agency for Public Management to develop an eGovernment tuned method for cost estimates and financing. Ultimately, it all boils down to the agencies aptness to re-organise themselves and make use of technology to reduce the number of civil servants *and* serve the citizens better.

Networking. The nervous system of a living system is built in the form of a mesh with interlinking fibres, hubs, gateways, nodes, functional centres, barrier arrangements, etc., and there is a unified messaging/signalling system. The advent of Internet and the TCP/IP protocol has indeed resulted in a World Wide Web of fantastic proportions and speed of penetration. Among the many parallel trends of the working of governments, one can

discern the two-directional trend toward both centralisation (national portals) and devolution (niche portals). At the same time there is a trend toward focusing on the core business and governance of the various government levels and sectors and individual entities. Networking is blurring the distinction between the public, private and NGO sectors, and today's portals are in the midst of this development. Up to the 70s, 'the Swedish Model' called for co-operation between The Government, and the central organisations of employers and employees, respectively. Those days are gone, and so is Sweden's 'good old' spirit of co-operation between the public and private sectors. Perhaps other countries also need to find a better working rapport in order to better serve the citizens by means of e.g. joint portals and private sector portals as outlets for government services.

User modelling. To a large extent, governments are using what in industry is called factory outlet. Governmental bodies are in a sense monopolies, and have from that perspective delivered their respective societal good. It is true that citizens are not customers in the private sector meaning, but it is also true that expressions such as 'Customer Relations Management' and 'Customer Care' and 'The Customer is Always Right' and 'Market and Needs Analysis' should have their equivalents in the Government-Citizen sphere. It is a relatively straight forward process to employ such an approach from within each agency's jurisdiction, and this is also implemented the ServiceDialogue project (see section 2.1.1). It is far from a straight forward process to interact with and model the users, be it citizens or enterprises, in the ever more common situation where a portal aims at providing a single service channel for several otherwise autonomous and independently accountable agencies. A challenge that may be particular to Sweden *how* to bring one-stop shops and similar multi-agency services in light of the de facto situation that the agencies are independent and that the Government Cabinet is extremely cautious about *ordering* inter-agency co-operation.

Liability. Public information cannot be easily and reliably authenticated, and viewers of Web documents do not know whether they are looking at an official and latest version of the document or not - and this problem is amplified if the document is obtained via a portal not belonging to the document issuer. Search engines do not always provide the complete response to posed questions - not even when the question is asked in the prescribed search format - and this problem is amplified in niche portals marketed as *the* public sector niche portal. In general, the more value portals provide to citizens and enterprises, the more critical becomes the liability of the portal. This problem doesn't go away by publishing ('fin-print' or 'at-the-end') disclaimers. In fact, any value producing governmental entity needs to be defined in terms of responsibility and accountability. Government portals produce value, otherwise they wouldn't exist.

Availability. Besides the aforementioned liability problem regarding completeness and quality of information and services, value providers also

need to deal with access from the Digital Divide perspective of human and technology reader-friendliness. These problems are escalating at the same pace as the general development of information and communication technology. Web based services are today said to be additions to traditional service channels. We are, however, no doubt moving from a situation where electronic services were marginal exceptions, to a situation where electronic services are becoming the first line of services, and perhaps even the only line of services. The services provided by the Swedish Labour Market Administration (AMS) and its affiliated County Labour Boards is an illustrative example. About to be implemented is a service line in which the 'jobber'-seekers are invited to keep and manage their job-seekers database within the AMS system. Such a service would require that AMS can guarantee 24/7 services and, say, 99,5 % up-time. Whatever happens in the technology arena, the availability bottom line remains intact: all service channels should be used for the benefit of the users, which among other things means that security and authentication hurdles must be overcome for delivering individualised service -- 'My Portal'.

3.6 Portal highlights

http://www.sverigedirekt.gov.se/english/about_sverigedirekt.asp is the National Portal and is proposed to be defined an agency. Links to Web sites meeting the public sector minimum set of quality recommendations are marked with a star symbol (★).

<http://www.sweden.se/si/67.cs> is the official Web gateway to Sweden, in English.

<http://www.lagrummet.gov.se/> is the portal bringing together all legal text produced by the Swedish state agencies, the Government Cabinet, and the Parliament. It is a distributed database unified by means of strict adherence to a common metadata infostructure. No material is available in English.

<http://www.oresunddirekt.com/dk/engelsk.asp> is a joint Danish-Swedish portal initiative providing user centric information for citizens and enterprises at both sides of Oresund, the straight separating Denmark and the Southern tip of Sweden. It provides information on the Swedish side in Danish, and information on the Danish side in Swedish. There is also a telephone hotline, a dictionary and a news subscription. In parallel to the portal 'front office', the public authorities on both sides have been organised into a 'back office' network.

<http://www.studera.nu/english/index.shtml> is a one-stop shop for all Swedish higher education opportunities, as well as information about careers and postgraduate studies. An XML-based metadata application ensures that the search engine can find up-to-date information on every single course.

<http://smn.environ.se/miljonat/english/index.htm> is an example of a co-operative portal. The 124 members represent environment stakeholders from

all levels of government, NGOs, and enterprises. The common denominator is an elaborate Dublin Core type of metadata standards.

<http://www.oppnasverige.gov.se/se/index.html> is an example of an ad hoc campaign portal. In this case the Open Sweden campaign, which is intended to increase access and openness within the public sector. The public access to information principle has been a fundamental tenet of Swedish law since 1776.

<http://platsbanken.ams.se/> is the job vacancies portal belonging to the family of six labour market portals (databases) provided by the Swedish Labour Market Administration (AMS). The portals have been in operation since 1995 and are steadily growing in scope and popularity. Behind the portals scene, AMS has created an open source taxonomy for CVs and Jobs.