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In the public eye

How social media platforms can help public financial managers

Public sector managers are embracing transparency as a positive element of financial management and they are increasingly seeking to adopt digital platforms, including social media and mobile communication, to keep citizens informed of spending.

According to the Global Financial Management Leaders Survey 2015 by Grant Thornton and International Consortium on Governmental Financial Management (ICGFM), senior public financial managers see transparency as an essential element, not only of their own work, but of good government itself.

This report draws on a survey of 278 PFM leaders from related areas of government and donor organisations, as well as directors from private companies and academia. The survey was executed using in-person interview sessions, a multilingual online survey and a polling mechanism at the ICGFM annual international training conference. Participants represented over 40 countries across Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia Pacific and the Americas.

A senior economist from Uganda described how “it is vital that citizens get value for money and this can only happen under a transparent system”. A colleague from Nigeria was more blunt: “If there is transparency, citizens will benefit because income that would have been swindled can be used for welfare amenities and other public benefits.”

Transparency was also linked with the ability of governments to make positive change across the board. A South African respondent indicated that community meetings were held to enhance transparency in government work – which was vital to “securing openness when dealing with taxpayers’ money.”



“Public trust will always be the best political capital for any reforms, enabling an environment of transparency and accountability supports our ability to make more reforms,”

said a Filipino respondent.

Encouragingly then, this survey did not find transparency to be perceived as a burden, but rather as a positive for government as well as other stakeholders. Some 47% of those surveyed believe the main beneficiaries of transparency are citizens, and the same proportion says that citizens and the government both gain.

Governments stand to gain from transparency

As one respondent from a developed country said, transparency is “a necessary pre-condition for accountability and high-quality decision-making.”

Transparency not only keeps government departments honest, it also gives them information they can act upon that ties their services a little closer to the expectations and needs of people. It is also an increasingly important political imperative.

“There is clearly a pull from the people for more information on public policy, finances, spending, reforms and the health of the economy in general,” states the report which continues to emphasise that this is taking place even “to the extent that it is becoming an election-winning theme in many democracies.”

Digital tools that enhance transparency are underused

Consistent with their understanding of the importance of transparency, three-quarters of respondents report using innovation to increase transparency.

However, a closer look at their use of digital technology, suggests that governments are far from the cutting edge. Only 75% of those surveyed say that their organisations are using websites to increase transparency. This is a remarkably small figure given the age of websites as a communications channel: government institutions as varied as the White House in the United States and Birmingham City Council in the United Kingdom have sites dating back to 1994.

As a first priority then, governments must find the best channel of communication with which to enhance transparency. But this is likely to differ from country to country.



“Leaders have to think about how their own populace communicates and use that to drive change and transparency, if, as in much of Africa, most of your country has a cell phone but no computer, then it would make more sense to push things out via cell phone,”

states the report’s authors.

This is already the way of things in India. “Increasingly the government is moving away from computer e-governance to mobile m-governance,” states the report, “particularly to engage young people.”

Many leaders may expect social media to become their primary channel, but the survey found under half (43%) use social media in their departments.

By contrast, that figure is only slightly higher than those using mailing distribution lists to send out traditional group emails (37%).

This starkly contradicts the research in that most respondents believe social channels are effective in bringing greater transparency to budget allocations (73%) and also regarding the making of these budget allocations more responsive to citizen priorities (53%).

Even where governments do use social media, their activity does not necessarily drive stronger public participation and engagement. One respondent from Georgia, whose organisation uses social media to explain budget allocations, said frankly: “I do not think our usage is innovative.”

This highlights that once the right channel is identified, the real innovation is in the content and dynamics of the communication itself.

Transparency is more than making information available

In almost every example where survey respondents cited the use of digital channels for transparency, communication was largely only one way and in just one format. Many governments are certainly publishing data on their activities, but

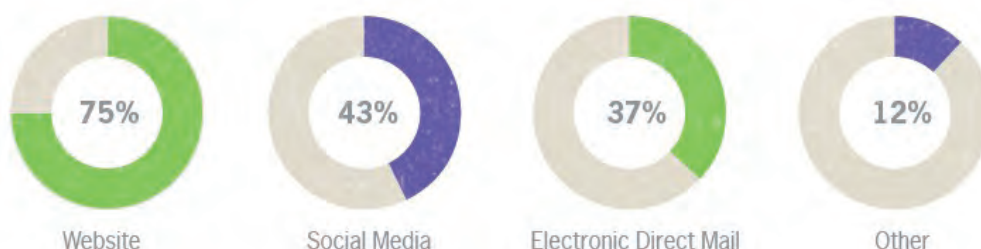
few are also offering tools for analysis or engaging in communication with the public about the data. This is consistent with what the report states. “Right now they’re just shovelling data out there. There’s not much in the way of analytics associated with it.”

The problem with this, says the report, is that “you can bury information just by sheer volume. It is not transparent if you just flood citizens with raw data.”

The report suggests governments need to be more strategic about the data they put out - ensuring it is contextualised in a way that can inform, assist and educate citizens. Like social media then, the transformative potential of open data remains just that.

The report finds that there are not enough good examples of “information published in such a way that citizens can digest, work through and interpret what it means.” So although most are committed to transparency, public financial managers in many countries still need to find the right methods and digital tools to put it into practice.

Which digital communication channels are you using to increase transparency for citizens?



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