

Government going Digital, but long road ahead

The government is going digital and here's how. The Dataquest-IDC MegaSpenders '07 survey reports a growth of 27% in IT spendings by top Indian companies for the financial year 2006-2007, with PSUs forming a major part of the top 50 spenders. It further projects a growth of 26% in IT spend for the present year amounting to Rs.8,974 crores. 42% of such spendings account for hardware such as servers, desktops and laptops whereas packaged softwares and services softwares account for another 26% each.

But the most noticeable find of the survey was the increasing expenditure on IT systems by the government and government enterprises. This clearly gives a jolt to the idea that privatization is a pre-requisite to modernization and deployment of modern IT technology. Clearly the 700 crore rupees allocated for e-governance in this year's budget is actually fructifying to a certain degree.

The Banking Financial Services and Insurance (BFSI) sector emerged as a frontrunner in IT spendings along with Telecom. The top 15 IT spenders in the BFSI sector also made it to the top 50 list which featured names such as Bank of Baroda, Bank of India, Canara Bank, Centurion Bank, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, IDBI Bank, Indian Overseas Bank, ING Vysya Bank, Karnataka Bank, Punjab National Bank, State Bank of India and Syndicate Bank. Four insurance firms; LIC, New India, Oriental and United India also made it to the top 50 list.

So the question is what does all of this do for the common man? The answer, it is a step forward in realizing the dream of bringing the masses of the country on a common 'Information Highway'. Granted that most of these IT spendings are directed towards modernizing and upgrading individual business systems but such modernization and upgradation will eventually bring everyone on the same common IT platform, which in turn will benefit the common man through e-governance. E-governance in turn will remove all barriers of time and space and connect everyone through this information superhighway.

But before we get dreamy eyed about the remotest of villages in the country being connected to the rest of the world through the vistas of the internet, we need to take stock of the challenges that lie ahead. In spite of a larger allocation to e-governance in this year's budget and the seemingly increased IT spendings by PSUs, we still have a long way to go before our e-governance vision can truly blossom.

Firstly, there is the great rural- urban divide. Projects such as the ITC promoted e-Choupal are novel attempts at bridging the same but really have a long way to go.

Secondly, the level of computer literacy is extremely poor especially in the rural areas. The entire idea behind e-governance is to empower the people and through the people make the government accountable. But unless a certain minimum standard of computer literacy is achieved this will remain nothing but a mere distant dream.

Thirdly, though the government is very enthusiastic about e-governance it has yet a lot to learn about how to implement it. When British e-governance Minister, Pat McFadden, visited India last April he outlined accessibility and implementation of e-governance projects as the biggest challenges that the government here faced. There is a strong sense of haphazardness about implementing such projects without proper planning. Proper planning in itself would include

educating and training the end users (citizens) in the IT technology employed, something that seems to be missing in a large number of e-governance projects undertaken by various states.

And lastly, the biggest challenge is corruption. Even though the government has allocated 700 crore rupees towards e-governance the amount that actually materializes is far less. Many e-governance pilot projects never reach the next stage of execution simply because of shortage of funds, something that should not be happening with a 700 crore rupees budget.

All in all, the Dataquest survey shows that there is still hope for our e-governance vision. It comes as no surprise that the private sector enterprises take the cake in terms of IT spendings. But at the end of the day it is the government that has to step up if the idea is to empower the people through IT. A start has been made but there is still a long road ahead before we can truly empower our masses through the information superhighway.

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