

Using Information Technology to Provide Government Services to the Public

Translated from the Annual Report of the State Comptroller of Israel #53B

Published – April 2003

(Pages: 202-227)

The rapidly developing technology of information, including the Internet, places powerful tools in the hands of the government with which to reshape and considerably improve the services it provides to the public. Today the technology of the Internet permits it to conduct in addition to distributing and receiving textual, vocal and visual information other activities and services such as payments and acquisition of goods. Accordingly it enables the government to be available anyplace, anytime, providing efficient service to the public, at a lower cost than the cost of face-to-face service. The provision of government services by way of the Internet can reduce the workload in government units that provide services, thus improving the service even for those who still need to apply in person because the unit does not have Internet or does not know how to use it, or because he needs a service which can only be given personally.

From May to December 2002, intermittently, the State Comptroller's Office examined the main activities of central government agencies that have been using information technology to provide government services to the public. The State Comptroller's Office also examined the degree to which Cabinet decisions on this issue have been implemented. The audit was conducted in the Accountant General Department in the Ministry of Finance, the Prime Minister's Office, the State Budget Department in the Ministry of Finance and in a number of other government units.

1. In the past decade Israeli Governments have been aware of the great developments in the use of information technology and have tried to utilize it to provide information and services to the public. Improvement of the service to the public by means of information technology was already mentioned in the recommendations of the Kubersky Commission, which was submitted to the Government in 1989. The Commission declared that full use of information technology by governmental administration would be the main way to make it more efficient and recommended taking steps to reach that end quickly by preparing an overall program. But until 1997 no practical governmental steps had been taken to promote the issue.

2. A committee called the “Government Internet Committee” operated in 1997-1999 out of the Accountant-General’s Office. It aimed to arrive at a mutually agreed-upon policy among government offices for the use of Information Technology and for the provision of information to government decision-makers, for defining needs and suggesting how to meet them. The committee included representatives of various government offices, and dealt with the procedures, training, and dissemination of information by the Internet. The work of the committee led to the implementation of projects, which formed the core of sub-systems of the e-Government project¹, such as the TEHILLA Project² and the Israel Government Gateway³.

3. In 1997 a special subcommittee for information technology, attached to the Economic Committee of the Knesset [Israeli parliament] (hereafter, the Information and Telecommunication Subcommittee), headed by Member of Knesset Michael Eitan, with the

¹ See below for the sub-systems of the eGovernment project and their current stage of progress.

² Hebrew acronym for “government infrastructure for the Internet era” – a project aims to link government ministries to the Internet and to form an infrastructure for communication with the public. Literally: praise. See below.

³ The government website (<http://www.info.gov.il>) providing information and offering entry into the websites of governmental organizations. See below.

aid of experts from academia, industry, and the civil service, prepared a comprehensive report on Israel's preparedness for the Information Era (hereafter, the Subcommittee Report). The report said that implementation of the recommendations of the Kubersky Committee was still at the experimental stage and full cooperation with all the government ministries had not yet been achieved. It also said that while a few of Israel's public bodies were striving towards computerization and were exploiting modern information and communication infrastructures in order to better serve the public, on the whole Israel was lagging far behind other countries in this area. The report further said that no one government unit was responsible for promoting the subject approaching the government as a single comprehensive system, there was no planning in the country for the development of computerization and communication, and the projects completed at that time did not show evidence of inter-ministerial cooperation.

4.A Cabinet decision dated September 1997 on the topic of "Israel's Preparedness for the Information Era", which was taken "subsequent to the report of the Knesset Committee on Telecommunications and Information" stated among other things that:

"1.The Prime Minister will name a Minister or Deputy Minister who will act to promote the State of Israel's preparedness for the Information Era, as follows:

a)To initiate changes in legislation, in regulations, and in operating procedures and in any other area it deems appropriate, towards the goal of readying the State of Israel for the Information Era in general and to make the economy and the public sector in particular more efficient, through the use of information technology....

....

c)To act to provide administrative and other services, which are characterized by a large number of users, through information technology. These services will be available to the

public through information stations throughout the country, and by means of open communication using the Internet.

d) Establishing a governmental information portal (“Israel Government Gateway”).

e) Defining an official government standard for Internet identification and personal security (smart card) to operate eGovernment services, and defining the operating environment.

f) To initiate programs in the area of information technology.

g) To keep track of country-wide and world-wide developments in the area of information technology and their application to Israel

h) To establish a public council for information and communication which will be appointed by the Prime Minister. The Cabinet shall be kept informed.

2. To appoint one of the top executives of every government ministry and unit to act as Chief Information Officer, and to coordinate Government units and activities dealing with information technology, by means of a forum of Chief Information Officers.

3. Funding will be provided by the savings generated in each ministry as a result of these activities, or as to be determined.

4. The Finance Minister and the minister to be appointed as per Clause 1 above will decide the details relevant to this decision within 30 days.”

In October 1997 the Prime Minister appointed his deputy minister, Michael Eitan, to take charge of Israeli preparedness for the Information Era as per the above Cabinet decision, in a personal capacity. In December of that year the Cabinet decided to establish within the Prime Minister’s Office a governmental unit to prepare Israel for the Information Era (known by its Hebrew acronym – HILA). The decision stated that HILA would act to set standards, to stimulate changes in legislation, in regulations, and in operating procedures, and to apply

the Cabinet decision of September 1997. The state audit found that no public council for information technology had been appointed in accordance with the Cabinet decision.

From the documents it appears that in the years 1997-1999 HILA, along with the Accountant General Department of the Finance Ministry and other offices, was involved in a number of initiatives in the area of eGovernment, among them: email in government offices, the nature of the government portal, and the placement of government forms and information repositories for the public's use on the Internet. At the same time, the Committee of Ministers for Information Affairs and Technology made several decisions, initiated by HILA, regarding the operation of Internet sites by government offices and their use of email.

In October 1999, it was decided, with Cabinet approval, to transfer HILA to the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport. The State Comptroller's Office was informed that HILA ceased its activities a short while after being transferred to that ministry. The state audit discovered that the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport did not inform the Cabinet Secretariat or any other government body of the cessation of activity of HILA, nor was HILA's authority to apply the September 1997 Cabinet decision delegated to any other body.

5. In a document dated September 1999 and entitled, "Initiation Paper – eGovernment 2000 Program" (hereafter - Initiation Paper) and sent to the Accountant-General by the Information Systems Unit in the Accountant-General's Department, it was noted that during 1997-1999 the Finance Ministry, along with a number of other government offices, including the Ministry of Science, the Government Publications Office and HILA, spearheaded governmental activity in the field of eGovernment. With the entry into office of the new

Cabinet “a lacuna developed in the management of eGovernment, due to the non-functioning of some of those involved; the Finance Ministry’s continued leadership at this time could contribute greatly to the project’s continuation.” It further noted that the Information Systems Unit was interested in advancing the “eGovernment 2000” program, which is a direct continuation of the Unit’s activities in regard to information systems in 1999, in the Accountant-General’s Department, in the framework of the TEHILA project as well as of other eGovernment activities being conducted concurrently in the Accountant-General’s Department. The Initiation Paper claimed that attempts to advance eGovernment in other governmental frameworks had encountered a lack of infrastructure and trained personnel, while the Department, by virtue of its know-how and trained personnel, is better equipped to carry out the program than any other government body.

The Initiation Paper noted that in order to implement the ancillary projects planned in the framework of the eGovernment project, a Cabinet decision authorizing them is necessary. Likewise, it would be necessary to cooperate with other offices and to set up an administrative team to track implementation. Participating in that team should be members of the Information Systems Unit of the Accountant-General’s Department, the Budget Department and the Requisitions Committee. Furthermore, it noted that the next stage of the project would be to draw up a document characterizing a master plan which sets out the limits of the system, how it would be subdivided, and an implementation program which would include a breakdown into projects, a recommendation on the work method of each project (whether to be developed by an outside body, by government personnel, or by acquiring an off-the-shelf program) and listing what staff would be necessary. The document

estimated that the cost of personnel and programs to realize the ancillary projects would come to some 1.5 million NIS per year⁴.

The State Audit found that the Information Systems Unit did not receive a reply in writing to its recommendations from the Accountant-General nor from any other authoritative office-holder. Nevertheless, in practice the Accountant-General's Department began to carry out the eGovernment project. However, it should be noted that it did so without implementing the Initiation Paper's detailed recommendations. For example, the Accountant-General's Department did not submit the ancillary projects to the Cabinet for approval⁵, did not set up an implementation follow-up team and did not prepare a system analysis and design document nor a master plan⁶.

In December 2002, the Accountant-General's Department wrote to the State Comptroller's Office: "in fact the project was successfully implemented and received cooperation even without Cabinet decisions, which were not taken for political reasons and because of pressures from those who feared that the project would weaken their power. Since the project was not brought for approval *en bloc* a follow-up team was not set up and a master plan was not prepared. The projects mentioned were promoted individually, each with its own set of features and its own management".

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, given the importance, scope, and complexity of the project⁷, it would have been proper to prepare a design of the master

⁴ In regard to the project's 2002 budget, in accordance with the decisions taken at the Finance Ministry, see below.

⁵ Only in May 2002 did the Accountant-General's Department initiate a Cabinet decision, in the course of the State Audit on the subject; see below.

⁶ See below for the findings of the state audit on this subject.

⁷ For details on the eGovernment project and on the projects included therein see below.

plan, to bring the project and the manner of its implementation to the Cabinet for approval, and to appoint a follow-up team.

6. In April 2000 the cabinet decided to table the announcement of Prime Minister. Ehud Barak that he had appointed “a public professional committee for a new public administration” (hereafter – the public committee) whose task it would be to “examine the structure of the public sector and its structural and organizational foundations, its patterns of behavior, and its activities, and to suit them to the needs and the missions with which it will need to deal in the 21st century in order to give the public high quality, available and accessible service.”

The Cabinet further decided to establish a staff to implement the reform of the civil service (hereafter – the Reform Staff) and coordinate the work of the public committee. In a position paper on the topic of eGovernment in the Israeli civil service presented by the head of the reform staff to the director-general of the Prime Minister’s Office in January 2001 it stated, among other things, that there is no single body which deals with the issue centrally, and that “the development (in part impressive in itself) is the result of initiatives at the field level There is no possibility that online administration would be developed only as the result of the initiative of government ministries, independent units, government corporations, municipalities, etc. A guiding hand is required to coordinate the development of the subject. At the same time it is important to remember that the subject cannot be promoted without an operative structure and a suitable budget.” It was also noted in the position paper that it is up to the Government to give the issue high priority, to turn the project into a general government project and to establish a body that would promote the subject.

Despite its importance no discussion was held on the position paper presented by the head of the Reform Staff, either in the Prime Minister's office or in any other governmental body, and no decisions were taken in regard to any of its recommendations.

7. In October 2001 the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Mr. Silvan Shalom, issued a writ appointing a "Supreme Steering Committee for eGovernment and Improvement of Service to Citizens" (hereafter – the Steering Committee). The Committee was made up of several directors-general of government ministries, the Accountant-General, the Civil Service Commissioner, the Administrator of the Courts, the director-general of Inbal⁸, a government corporation, and the director of the MERKAVA⁹ project and of the eGovernment project in the Finance Ministry. The writ appointing the Steering Committee did not name a chairman for the committee; however, from the documents it appears that the director-general of the Prime Minister's Office served as chairman as such.

The writ of appointment stipulated that the Steering Committee would guide the eGovernment project in all government ministries and independent units, would determine the "mechanisms for making internal procedures in government offices more efficient by using computer tools and data bases, and would show the ministries how to provide services directly to the public, by way of the Internet".

The writ of appointment further declared that the tasks of the Steering Committee would be as follows:

⁸ He had been a senior deputy to the Accountant-General and as such set up the 'Government Internet Committee' and served as its head.

⁹ Acronym for a broad-based general system whose purpose was to create a uniform computerized infrastructure for government offices. See below.

(a)“To guide” overall government action aimed at providing the public with eGovernment services in order to reduce bureaucracy.

(b)To set the policy for integrating a general resource-management system in government offices (known by its Hebrew acronym, MERKAVA).

(c)To determine policy for integrating government web sites, the government smart card, and the government payment server (a project known by its Hebrew acronym, TEHILA) into various government activities.

(d) To guide the Steering Committee and the TEHILA and MERKAVA implementation teams in carrying out their missions.

(e)To instruct government offices as regards the necessary changes in their work procedures and the equipment needed to successfully accomplish the eGovernment Project.

(f)To recommend necessary changes in primary and secondary legislation that were identified in the course of implementing the project.

The minutes of the Steering Committee indicate that it held three meetings – in January, April and August 2002¹⁰. Examination of their minutes reveals that the activities carried out in some of the eGovernment subcommittees were surveyed but the Steering Committee still did not deal with what it was set up to do, as detailed above, nor did it take any decisions regarding management of the project. Furthermore, it appears that the Committee did not demand that the Accountant-General’s Department provide a master plan for the management of the project.

¹⁰ The draft minutes of the last meeting in August had not been ratified as of the termination of the state audit – November 2002

8. In the course of state audit on the subject, the Finance Ministry precipitated a Cabinet decision in relation to the eGovernment Project and its ancillary projects. The explanatory foreword to the proposed decision stated, among other things, that current government information systems were characterized by broad decentralization, were old, and did not allow for full and reliable data collection on government activities. As a result, governmental processing was slow, and it was difficult to transfer data between offices or to provide adequate service to the public. These shortcomings result in significant financial damage, estimated in hundreds of millions of NIS to both the government and the public. Citizens suffer from slow and ill-planned service, are forced to apply personally to government offices for the simplest procedure, and thousands of man-hours are lost. Money is wasted and citizens are dissatisfied.

In May 2002, the Cabinet decided, at the initiative of the Finance Ministry, as follows:

“1. To establish an overall foundation for realizing the eGovernment Project in the State of Israel.

2. To base the effectuation of the eGovernment Project on Project TEHILA (Internet foundation for government offices). Project TEHILA will streamline the flow of knowledge between the government and the public by creating a secure Internet mechanism linking MERKAVA and government data systems with the public.

3. To set up a central system accessible to the public for making payments and placing orders, thus enabling citizens to pay taxes, user fees, and licenses or to acquire government tenders and publications online.

4. To install systems of identity verification and electronic signatures in the government by means of Project TAMAR (Hebrew acronym for Public Key Foundation). The systems to be set up are:

(a) A set of forms which will enable citizens to fill out most existing government forms online and to sign them electronically.

(b) Smart card based systems for identity verification and electronic signatures to utilize government information systems, as in Projects MERKAVA and TEHILLA, for a wide range of sensitive items where the system requires secure identification and signature.

(c) Systems of identity verification and electronic signatures which will enable secure connections to government data bases in order to provide each citizen with secure access to his or her own personal/sensitive data.

5. To establish support systems for assimilating and disseminating the use of the new information systems to the public, based on Project LAHAVA¹¹, in order to reduce the existing gap between periphery and center by establishing computer support centers in peripheral communities, and by establishing telephonic computer support centers to serve those who cannot avail themselves of the government's online services.

6. To implement the eGovernment Project, both between government offices and within them, by setting up Project MERKAVA (Hebrew acronym for Overall Across-the-Board System in Government Offices). The infrastructure of MERKAVA will upgrade and unify the Government's strategic information systems. MERKAVA will also streamline and simplify the government's flow of information. A government Intra-net will be set up in order to deploy the new information systems and allow the secure transmission of information between government offices.

¹¹ Hebrew acronym for "To close the digital gap in Israeli society". Literally: flame. See below.

7.To establish a ministerial steering committee, headed by the Director-General of the Prime Minister's office, with the participation of the top echelons of the relevant government agencies, to implement clauses 1-4 and 6.

9.During the years 1997-2002, the following ancillary systems of the eGovernment Project had been set up in the Accountant-General's Department, or were being developed:

(a) **Project TEHILA:**

A secure mechanism which facilitates Internet communications possible for government offices, utilizing computer desktops and central service sites¹², thus enabling each government office to present its own web site and utilize email. As of September 2002, some 36 governmental offices had utilized infrastructure to connect to the Internet for the purpose of surfing the web and using email. And 35 government offices had set up their own websites in the Project's central service site.

(b) **Israel Government Gateway:**

An Internet portal which allows entrance to more than one eGovernment services, developed by the Government Publications Bureau. The portal contains its own search engine for locating government websites according to the information provided in the Government Gateway.

¹² Central service site –a group of computers whose task it is to provide off-site services to network users such as storing files or printing.

(c) **Israeli Government ePayment Service:**

An infrastructure that permits users to pay for services and goods online. It was inaugurated in December 2001 and by October 2002 13 government offices were utilizing it.

(d) **TAMAR:**

Hebrew acronym for public key infrastructure – a framework aimed at making it possible to identify authorized contacts by their electronic signatures and to identify changes made to electronic messages by unauthorized persons. The framework encompasses various projects at different stages of development and integration into existing systems. The aim of one such project (called Project TELEM – the Hebrew acronym for national computerized documentation, *i.e.*, smart cards) is to provide electronic signatures to citizens, to government employees and businesspeople. It is also planned to distribute means for generating electronic signatures to the general public.

(e) **Government Forms Server:**

A central system for downloading the forms used by various government offices and enabling the public to fill them out and submit them online. In November 2002 a pilot program was launched, containing the forms used by the Ministry of Interior.

(f) **The Safe-Deposit Project:**

A system designed to transmit official certificates and sensitive personal data securely from government offices to citizens and businesses. It is in the process of development and its operation is scheduled for the beginning of 2003.

(g) Project LAHAVA:

The purpose of the project is to close the digital gap in Israeli society and integrate data information technology into population sectors that have no access to technology, and thereby easing their access to cultural treasures, enhancing their general knowledge and improving the quality of their leisure time. The project was launched at the beginning of 2002, and as of November 2002, two community-based computer centers had been opened.¹³

Similarly, the Accountant-General's Department is working on two intra-governmental projects, designed to improve the government's own information systems. The Department believes that they will impact on the service to the public:

(1) Gov.net – the government intranet:

It aims to create a secure central site for services and central applications and to link all government networks so as to facilitate the secure transmission of information among them.

(2) MERKAVA:

Acronym for a broad-based general information system in government offices. Its purpose is to create a uniform computer infrastructure for government offices. At first it will serve as a basis for the management of financial systems, human resources, and logistics in government offices as well as functioning as an administrative system for the Israel Police and the Government Housing Authority. This stage, called "Ofan", constitutes a pilot project that was meant to continue till August 2003. Extending it to most government offices was expected to last until 2007.

The state audit discovered that the Accountant-General's Department, which in practice has managed the eGovernment Project since 1999, had not prepared, as of the

¹³ See below.

termination of the audit in November 2002, an annual or multi-annual work plan or a document characterizing a master plan of the project and its ancillaries. Nor did the Accountant-General submit in time, either to the coordinator of the Finance Ministry's budget or to the coordinator of the Information Systems area in the Budget Department, detailed work plans for the eGovernment Project, including the annual budgets required to implement it.

1. From the documentation it appears that only in March 2002 did the Accountant-General's Department submit to the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister a document dealing with the exigencies of the project for the year 2002, which totaled some 34 million NIS. That month the Finance Minister approved 25 million NIS of the project's budget and directed the Ministry's Director-General to find means. From an internal document of the Budget Department it appears that in November 2002 instructions were issued to offset 10% of the budget surpluses from the computer budgets of government offices for the year 2002 in order to finance the eGovernment Project. The above documents also seem to indicate that as of November 2002 the eGovernment Project's budget process for that year had not yet been completed.

Following the audit, the Budget Department wrote to the State Comptroller's Office in December 2002, that its budget proposal for 2003 included budgets specifically addressed to the eGovernment Project and the MERKAVA Project, and that the budget allocation of the Finance Ministry was recorded separately from the participation of other government ministries in the cost of the project.

2. In November 2002, following audit of the subject, the Accountant-General's Department furnished the State Comptroller's Office with the preliminary version of the master plan that it had prepared, noting that it would be brought to the Steering Committee for ratification at its next meeting. The Department further announced that it would soon act to obtain a writ of appointment for managing the project in which the functions and responsibility for the subject would be detailed. In January 2003 the Deputy Accountant-General submitted to the State Comptroller's Office a writ of appointment received that same month from the Finance Minister, in which he was appointed head of the eGovernment Project; a copy of the writ was sent to the Prime Minister.

Examination of the first version of the above master plan showed that it was overly general and did not indicate how it arrived at its data concerning the time frame for finishing the eGovernment Project and its ancillary projects, or the budget for implementing them. It was not clear if all the costs involved were included. The State Comptroller's Office remarked to the Accountant-General's Department that the appropriate thing would be to finish preparing an up-to-date master plan, laying out in detail the annual and multi-annual budgets necessary to implement the project, and that it be brought as soon as possible to the Steering Committee, or any other authorized body, for ratification.

Several committees recommended, and the Cabinet even decided that an office-holder or supra-ministerial body, overseen by the responsible Ministerial Committee, would

closely supervise the progress of the project and would coordinate the activities undertaken and the investment of resources required for this purpose. The state audit found that the HILA Unit filled this task until the end of 1999. The state audit further discovered that in fact, since the end of 1999 the eGovernment Project and its many and complex ancillary projects have been managed by the Information Systems Unit in the Accountant-General's Department, except for the smart card project (Project TELEM), which is coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior.

The Accountant-General wrote to the State Comptroller's Office in December 2002 that it accepts the finding “that there is a need for commitment at the highest levels of the state and that a guiding hand is necessary to coordinate all these efforts. The draft of the state audit report shows that all previous efforts to develop a ‘guiding hand’ had failed (the Kubersky Committee recommendations, HILA, the Reform Committee, etc.).” The Accountant-General further noted that the achievements in the area of cooperation with government offices and in the promotion of Information Technology projects encompassing all government offices “occurred voluntarily, but they cannot ever fully replace having a defined and binding framework”.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, given the influence of the eGovernment Project on services to the public and its national importance, it would be appropriate for the Steering Committee to thoroughly examine the format for managing projects. Such a format would need to include a supra-ministerial body that would promote the subject consistently and institute suitable controls. The Steering Committee should also work to promote the preparation of a long-term master plan for the project and should examine not only the computer aspect but also the

interconnected organizational aspects, continuously updating the master plan in accordance with technological and other developments. It should also follow up the implementation of the project in every governmental sector.

Internet Sites in Government Offices

Today's Internet technology allows for the concentration of large quantities of information. It can be updated rapidly and easily, and distributed to all those interested and connected to the Internet. It is possible to utilize all types of information – textual, audio and visual – and to provide government services such as receiving and filling out forms, paying taxes, levies, and fines, and ordering goods from government offices.

A government website can offer the public much information, ranging from useful information, such as the office's reception hours and the names and phone numbers of office-holders, to articles and studies connected to its activities. It can also provide the public with online services and maintain a rapid two-way channel of communication by way of email. Applicants are not limited to reception hours but can receive the information and the services at their own convenience.

There are advantages to a government body from the maintenance of an active and updated website: fewer personal demands for information and services; part of the technical work involved in filling out forms can be done by the client; savings in time and resources as a result of fewer printed government publications given that they appear on the Internet; and

savings in fees paid to intermediaries, such as the Postal Bank and commercial banks, who provide government services.

In September 1997 the Cabinet decided to provide administrative and other services required by a significant portion of the public, by means of information technology. The decision stated that these services would be provided by Information Centers throughout the country, and by way of the Internet. Likewise, it was decided to set up a government portal (web map) which would provide entry to government websites.

The Examination of Government Websites

The State Comptroller's Office examined 18 websites of ministries and government agencies, to ascertain whether they contained updated information on the services that they provided and whether it was easily available, and whether the website was user-friendly¹⁴.

Following are the findings:

1. The Arabic language on the Internet – Arabic is the language of the largest minority in the country and it holds a special status¹⁵. The state audit found that most government websites, including the Israel Government Gateway, information was not available nor were services provided in the Arabic language. The subject of presenting information in the Arabic language was raised at a meeting of the Government Internet Committee, in which the government portal was presented, but it was not found that the Committee or any other government body proposed or laid down the necessary regulations.

¹⁴ The findings particular to each website were brought to the knowledge of the government office which set it up.

¹⁵ Clause 82 to the King's Order in Council, 1922; Civil Appeal 105/92 Ram Engineers vs. the Municipality of Upper Nazareth, Piskei Din [Rulings] XLVII (5) 189, p.210; Civil Appeal 12/99 Jamal vs. Sabak, Piskei Din [Rulings] LIII(2) 128; BAGATZ [High Court of Justice] 4112/99 Adallah vs. Municipality of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Piskei Din [Rulings] LV (5) 393, p.418; Guideline 21.556 of the Attorney General.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, given that Arabic is the language of the largest minority in Israel, and in order to guarantee equality, to provide suitable services and to ease this sector's access to the authorities, a translation to Arabic should be added to their websites, containing essential information, including how to access the government services provided through the Internet.

Other foreign languages –Some government offices saw fit to publish at least some information on their websites in English. Several other public bodies, such as local governments, have provided information in other foreign languages, such as Russian, on their websites.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office there is room for asking the generality of government offices to consider translating vital information on their websites to additional languages (such as Russian and Amharic), in order to take into account the population which it is reasonable to assume uses the site.

2.

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egislation is the source of authority for government activities. The state audit found that in a number of the websites that were examined there was no mention, or only passing mention, and no link, to the primary legislation upon which the given body acted. For example, the website of the Prime Minister's Office does not contain the full and updated text of "Basic Law: The Cabinet".

3.The Freedom of Information Law, 5758-1998, states that all public authorities must publish an annual report that includes information on its activities and areas of responsibility

and an explanation of its tasks and powers. The Freedom of Information Regulations, 5759-1999, state that government ministries must publish a copy of their annual report on their website. To the extent that other public authorities establish websites, they must publish a copy of their annual report within a year of so doing. The State Comptroller's Office found that, as of the end of 2002, 10 of the 18 websites examined had not published a copy of the 2001 annual report, as required by regulations¹⁶.

4. The website of the Central Bureau of Statistics (hereafter – CBS) is an important source of information on areas of activity within the purview of government offices. The state audit found that the websites of some government offices do not provide links to the CBS website, even when it contains statistics concerning their areas of responsibility. For example, there is no link from the website of the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Education to the many statistics appearing in the websites of CBS pertaining to agriculture and education.

5. The TAKAM – the collection of administrative economic and financial regulations – stipulates that each individual page on a website should include the date on which it was last updated. Examination showed that the web pages of 9 out of 18 websites checked did not indicate when they were last updated.

6. The state audit found that the State Employment Bureau, a major agency particularly in the current climate of high unemployment, does not have a website. From the documents it appears that the State Employment Bureau set up a website in 2000 but due to opposition of the office's local labor union, it is not running. The

¹⁶ See the chapter on the activities of those responsible for applying the Freedom of Information Law.

website would have enabled authorized employers to locate suitable workers by reviewing their resumes online.

The State Employment Bureau informed the State Comptroller's Office that the Director-General of the bureau had recently reached an agreement in principle with the office's local labor union, according to which the website would begin to operate as soon as a number of changes were made. It would include information on the bureau itself but not the data of job seekers' resumes and not the data of available positions. A follow-up carried out in 2003 showed that the website was not yet in operation.

Updating Website Information on Government Services

The State Comptroller's Office examined to what extent government websites assist in receiving the services provided by the responsible office. Sixteen services were examined in 9 websites: where to receive services, including the street address, how to contact the place, what services were provided there, what conditions were required to receive assistance, and what documents it was necessary to furnish. In addition, the state audit examined whether it was possible to receive and fill out forms and to pay for services online. Also examined was whether there is institutionalized follow-up on the public's use of the Internet for the purpose of receiving service. Here are the main findings¹⁷:

1. Three of the websites examined did not provide information or only provided partial information on where to receive the service. For example, the website of the Ministry

¹⁷ The findings particular to each website were brought to the knowledge of the government office which set it up.

of Transportation continued to list branches in Dimona, Kiryat Gat, Ofakim and Kiryat Malakhi several months after they had been closed down.

2.Four of the websites examined did not publish information about the person in charge of giving the service. Four websites either lacked information or had incorrect listings of fax numbers and email addresses of the service providers.

3.Five websites had no information or only partial information on the areas dealt with by the examined units; three websites had only partial information on the documents it was necessary to furnish in order to receive the service and the possible channels for receiving it (by personally appearing in the government office, or receiving the service by mail, by telephone, by fax, or through the website).

4.Three websites did not indicate what forms were needed or else had no facilities for printing and using them. Four offices did not permit online payment of some or all services, while two offices did not keep track of how many persons sought online information or used online services.

Making Information Repositories Available to the Public

The right to receive information is one of the foundations of a democratic regime, and has recently been anchored in the Freedom of Information Law, 5758-1998. Government offices have computerized and non-computerized information repositories at their disposal. Making them available to the public would realize the above-mentioned right, would save them time and trouble, and would increase the economy's efficiency and productivity.

The state audit found that as of September 2002 only a few government information repositories had been placed online for the use of the public; for example, as previously noted, data on job offers and job-seekers in the State Employment Bureau had not yet been made available to the public. Another important information repository that had not yet been made available to the public was the Land Register conducted by the Lands Registry Administration in the Department of Justice, which contains information on land rights and land deals. In October 2001 the Ministry of Justice issued a tender for placing the information online, but it was postponed due to union opposition. Ministry employees opposed placing the data in the hands of outside bodies. According to the new time frame set by the Ministry of Justice in October 2002, after it had reached an agreement with the employees, the system was supposed to be online for public use by May 2003.

The audit found that government offices, which dealt with the development and provision of services and information with the help of the Internet , including HILA and the Government Internet Committee, discussed the issue of government information repositories but did not formulate any plan for making them available to the public. Such a plan should list the information, which would be so placed, what needs to be done in order to carry it out, and a time frame for its accomplishment. It would also be desirable that the plan is brought to the Steering Committee for ratification, and that the Steering Committee follows up on it.

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The above state audit findings show that some of the information in the government websites examined were not sufficiently up-to-date, and that it was impossible to do online many activities that the Internet technology makes possible, such as

downloading forms and payment for services. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, those responsible for government websites should update them in the wake of every change affecting services to the public, and should see to it that every possible service is actually supplied by the Internet.

TAKAM regulations require government websites to publish online the telephone numbers, addresses, and reception hours of government offices. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, TAKAM regulations should include rules for additional information to be placed on web sites regarding services provided to the public by government offices, possible channels for receiving those services¹⁸ and lists of the documents needed to receive those services.

Government Payment Service

The Government Payment Service is an infrastructure that makes it possible for the public to make payments (taxes, fines, and levies) to institutions, and to buy durable and digital products¹⁹. The service has operated since December 2001; as of October 2002, some 13 payment sites were in operation²⁰.

The purposes of the payment service, as laid out in the Initiation Paper of the Accountant-General's Department were as follows: *"Improving Service to the Citizen - ... the interactivity made possible by this media transforms online payment into one of the most*

¹⁸ Such as personally appearing in the government office, receiving the service by mail, by telephone, by fax, or through the website.

¹⁹ Text, audio and visual (video) files that are transmitted to the consumer through the Internet.

²⁰ A payment site is a site within the Government Payment Service, which is used by government offices for payment or sale of products.

convenient ways of making payments – they can be done at any time, without delay, and with a minimum of errors; *Creation of new government services* – today many government units do not provide certain services (for example, sending out printed materials) because they lack the resources. Due to the cost of these services they cannot be provided free of charge but on the other hand, the unwieldiness of collecting payment prevents selling them. The creation of an online payment service allows those services to be included in the government basket of services.”

Payment is made through the Government Payment Service by means of credit cards or direct bank transfer, from the bank account of the customer to the bank account of the service provider. At the time of writing only one bank was involved in direct bank transfer. The Payment Service was based on the assumption of the Accountant-General’s Department that in addition to improving service, it would bring about savings in the fees paid by the government to banks and credit card companies. Data from the Accountant-General’s Department on payments made by citizens to six government offices, which handle most of the payments made to government offices – the Department of Customs and Value-Added Taxes (VAT), the Israel Lands Authority, the Courts Administration, the State Employment Bureau, the Police, and the Transportation Department – show that in 2000 the payments made to them, through all payment channels²¹, totaled 37 billion NIS, and consisted of 6 million payments.

²¹ Directly to the government offices, through the banks, etc.

The Development of Payment Sites

At the end of 2001 the Accountant-General's Department proposed that government offices open payment sites within the framework of the Government Payment Service. The State Comptroller's Office examined the payment sites set up by some of the six above-mentioned government offices. The main findings are as follows:

1. The Department of Customs and VAT:
Beginning in March 2002 the Department conducted a pilot program whose purpose was to examine the possibility of submitting VAT reports and making payments through the Government Payment Service. The project was implemented in the VAT units in Petach Tikvah and Tel Aviv. Business owners could pay their debts in one of two ways: with a credit card for sums of up to 6,000 NIS per payment, or by direct bank transfer of an unlimited amount (at this stage, only from one bank).

The above-mentioned VAT units wrote or phoned some 10,000 businesses in their purview, with the aim of getting them to join the project. However, according to a letter sent on 14 July 2002 by the senior deputy of the director of the Mechanization and Autonomy [Computer?] Division of the Department of Customs and VAT to the director of the Department of Customs and VAT it appears that, as of that date, only 236 businesses had joined²².

The deputy director noted in his letter that several problems cropped up in the course of the pilot project, delaying the further extension of the option to submit VAT reports and to make

²² Details on VAT payments made in the framework of the pilot project and their breakdown, by month, are in the table below.

VAT payments online to the entire business population. Moreover, those problems are liable to decrease the number of businesses who take advantage of the new option. The main problems were: fear of disclosing the credit card number or the bank account number when paying online; the participation of only one bank in the direct bank transfer arrangement; some of the businesses were not linked to the Internet; the VAT regulations permitting online reporting, which are a necessary operating condition, had not yet been finalized; there was no technical support center in the Department of Customs and VAT; other payments, such as National Insurance and Income Tax payments, which are normally paid together with the VAT payments, could not yet be paid online, and therefore paying VAT online did not prevent the need to go to the bank.

It appears therefore that the issue of submitting VAT reports and making VAT payments online is complex, and has legal, computational, and administrative aspects. To do this online requires cooperation between a number of bodies, both within and without the Department of Customs and VAT, including the Accountant-General's Department, the Information Systems Unit of the Finance Ministry, and the banks. The documents showed that the Department of Customs and VAT was planning to facilitate the submission of VAT reports and VAT payments on a countrywide basis in May 2003, through the Government Payment Service. However, when the state audit ended, no time frame had been arranged for the actions necessary to implement the project, such as coordinating with the banks as to when the direct bank transfer arrangement would begin and completing the necessary regulations concerning online reporting.

The State Comptroller's Office notified the Department of Customs and VAT that it should coordinate a time frame for completing their assignments as soon as possible with all those involved and prepare an updated work plan for the project, that would solve the problems revealed in the pilot project.

2. Israel Lands Authority (ILA):
According to a document from the Accounting Department of the ILA, dated September 2002, it appears that the ILA has since July 2002 permitted the public to pay annual leasing fees and registration fees (parcelation) online by credit card. Payment can be made in six installments without interest and without linkage to the cost-of-living index, on condition that no payment exceeds 3,000 NIS. Furthermore, it appears that the ILA's income from leasing and registration fees in 2001 constituted some 15% of its income for that year.

The above ILA document also noted that the provision of additional online service requires that several issues be decided, including: a change in procedure and the obtaining of legal assurance that the new procedure meets all the requisite rules and regulations; changes in the ILA's automated systems – both in the central computer and in the website; suiting the financial controls of the Accounting Department to the new payment method; solution of technical problems related to ascertaining the identity of the client as a condition for providing services, where needed.

The state audit found that the ILA's work plan for 2003 referred to the issue of online fee collection in a general manner, without detailing the services to be provided online or the types of payments it would be possible to make online, and as a result no goals or time frames were set. The State Comptroller's Office indicated to the ILA that it

should draw up a plan that would set goals for 2003 in the area of online service development and lay down a timetable for its implementation.

3. Two other government offices to which the public makes large and frequent payments are the Income Tax Authority and the National Insurance Institute.

(a) Income Tax Authority:

The state audit found that as of the termination of the audit, in October 2002, the Income Tax Authority did not have a site on the Government Payment Service and had not even begun to develop one. The Accountant-General's Department informed the State Comptroller's Office that its appeals to the Income Tax Authority and meetings with its representatives were not yet productive. The Income Tax Authority wrote the State Comptroller's Office in December 2002 that in September of that year a meeting took place in the Income Tax Department, chaired by the Income Tax and Land Tax Commissioner, on the policy of allowing the public to make payments online. It is the intention of the Income Tax Authority to permit online payments of advance income tax payments in a process similar to that adopted by the Department of Customs and VAT. The Income Tax Authority intends to apply to the Accountant-General's Department at the beginning of 2003 for help in realizing the matter.

(b) The National Insurance Institute (NII):

The state audit found that as of the end of the audit, in October 2002, the NII did not have a site on the Government Payments Service. The Accountant-General's Department notified the State Comptroller's Office that the NII had expressed its willingness in principle to cooperate but no action had been taken.

The Director-General of the National Insurance Institute wrote to the State Comptroller's Office in December 2002 that "the National Insurance Institute was not aware of the existence of the Government Payments Service, since the Accountant-General's Department had only recently informed it of its existence, but after being informed expressed willingness to cooperate and had instigated a meeting one week previously with the company that had developed the system and a work time table was set up."

Below are the data provided by the Accountant-General's Department on the number of payments through the Government Payments Service from December 2001 to December 2002, according to office, service, and month:

	December 2001	January 2002	February 2002	March 2002	April 2002	May 2002	June 2002	July 2002	August 2002	September 2002	October 2002	Total
Gun License Fee	1	43	65	144	122	39	44	137	83	8		965
Sale of Books and Publications	3	10	16	8	8	6	13	6	8	17		107
Freedom of Information Fee	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		2
Sale of Publications	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	2		6
Court Fines	3	02	89	987*	22*	39	41	36	34	42		1,895
Sale of Maps and Publications			5	0	14	14	11	9	13	18		84
Submission of VAT Reports and Payment of VAT			23	6	77	15	39	17	96	28		351
Sale of Publications				17	17	13	11	10	10	5		83
Driving License Fee				460	636	53	35	556	278	938		3,286
Car License Fee						37	52	283	792	899		7,123

* The number of payments in these months was high because a campaign to collect overdue fines by offering reduced rates was coming to an end.

The following data from the Accountant-General's Department show the number of payments made until October 2002 by means of the ePayment Service, and the percentage of payments made this way:

Government Office	Type of Service Involved	Date ePayment Made Possible	Number of Vouchers Possible to Pay	Number of Vouchers Paid by ePayment	Percentage of Vouchers Paid by ePayment
Ministry of Transportation	Driving License	April 2002	532,018	6,286	1.18%
Ministry of Transportation	Car License	June 2002	780,087	7,123	0.91%
Israel Lands Authority	Leasing Fee	June 2002	88,813	391	0.44%

It is evident from the table that only a miniscule percentage of the payments that could have been made at the payment sites of the above government offices were actually paid that way. Even considering that only 22.5% of the households in the State of Israel were connected to the Internet²³, the rate of payment on the government sites was still extremely small. It is the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office that the Steering Committee and the Accountant-General's Department should explore ways to raise the frequency of payment through the ePayment Service.

One of the central activities of the eGovernment Project is the ePayment Service. State audit findings indicate that activity in this area is still in its early stages. Most of the government agencies examined have not yet taken steps to enable the public to pay through the Internet all the payments that could be paid in that way.

²³ According to data from the Survey of Household Expenses of the Central Bureau of Statistics for the year 2001.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office the Steering Committee, in cooperation with all government offices, should initiate the preparation of a detailed work plan for developing the ePayment Service, which sets down the degree of commitment of all the offices to the development of payment sites in the ePayment Service. The plan should include, among other things, details about the major actions that must be undertaken in order to develop the program, such as advertising, establishing a support center, and drawing up a schedule for doing so, with measurable goals that would show the degree of success of the ePayment Service. The program should be submitted for ratification to the Steering Committee so that it may be made mandatory.

Client Consciousness

Good service demands an approach that places the client and his needs and demands at the center. In all that pertains to the provision of government services and information on the Internet, it requires helping the public come to grips with the new technology and making it aware of the range of services that the new service channel – the Internet – can provide.

Marketing the ePayment Service

The state audit revealed that several government offices which facilitate payments or purchases through the Government ePayment Service limit themselves to a note on the invoice sent to the purchaser, in which the possibility of paying by Internet is mentioned among other forms of payment. This holds true for the Ministry of Interior, on the form for paying for a gun license; the Ministry of Transportation – on driving and car licenses; and the Israel Lands Authority – on the form for paying leasing fees. The websites of some agencies include a link to their payment site, but without special emphasis. At the Government Gateway, the government's official portal, the link to the Government

ePayment Service is difficult to find. Despite the fact that the government portal has three sites for posting notices which serve government offices for messages and publicity, as of September 2002 publicity for the ePayment service had not been posted in any of them.

From the summary of a discussion held on 6 January 2001 in the Information Systems Unit of the Accountant-General's Department it appears that a publicity campaign to market the ePayment Service would cost between NIS200,000 and NIS1.5 million, depending on the type and degree of publicity. A large-scale publicity campaign would be advisable only if additional services would be added to the ePayment Service, such as payments to the Ministry of Transportation and the Department of Customs and VAT. The state audit revealed that even though these and other services were indeed included in the ePayment Service, as of the termination of the audit in September 2002, the ePayment Service was not advertised.

Increasing the public's use of the ePayment Service depends on their awareness of the possibility of making payments in this convenient and efficient manner. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, the Accountant-General's Department, should make the public aware of their existence, in cooperation with other government offices with ePayment sites in the Government ePayment Service,. In December 2002, the Accountant-General wrote to the State Comptroller's Office that a publicity plan for marketing the ePayment Service had been prepared and as soon as its budget was allocated it would be implemented.

The State Comptroller's Office commented to the Accountant-General that even if it were impossible to implement the publicity campaign at this stage, for whatever reason,

at least information pertaining to the services provided by the Government ePayment Service should be posted on government websites, especially on the Government Gateway, on other central websites, on Internet portals, and in the current publications of government offices and units. It should be emphasized on the reverse of payment vouchers mailed to citizens.

Users Support

Users Support on Government Websites:Not everyone finds it easy to use Internet services. Often a user gets “stuck” in the middle of something and needs help in order to finish what he’s doing. Many organizations who provide Internet services acknowledge the need to provide users support and set up support centers. Usually this takes the form of telephone support, in which the surfer gets step-by-step help over the phone until the problem is solved. Project TEHILA has a support center which helps government employees connected to it through the Internet. Government employees can report problems by phone or by a computerized form and receive phone assistance.

However the support center of Project TEHILA does not support surfers who are not government employees, except for those using the ePayment Service (see below). It was further discovered that the Government Gateway does not provide telephone support. At the bottom of the site’s home page is a link “Write Us”. It links to a page which allows email to be sent to the site’s webmaster, but only for the purpose of giving the surfer’s impressions of the portal, offering suggestions for its improvement, or making requests. Under the “Help” link there are explanations about the site and how to use it, but it does not include the possibility of receiving assistance by phone or otherwise.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office those responsible for government websites should examine the issue of providing users support to surfers who are not government employees.

Users Support in the ePayment Service:In the Government ePayment Service payment is a complex activity for which a number of bodies are responsible: the government office receiving the payment, the credit card company or bank processing the payment, and Project TEHILA which hosts the payment site and is responsible for the technical links. This complexity and the fact that it involves monetary payment and not just the receipt of information, requires quick and easy telephone support to rescue the user from the problems he is liable to encounter.

1. Users support in the ePayment Service is divided among three telephone service centers: a private company, under contract to the Accountant-General's Department, facilitates service during regular office hours; support providers from other government offices with ePayment sites which provide support during office hours in regard to their own services, such as eligibility; and a support center in the Finance Ministry itself, which operates after-hours, records requests from users, and emails them to the private company which deals with them during working hours. The telephone support centers are not interconnected, and therefore if a user who has contacted one center needs to apply to another one, he has to sever the connection and redial to the other center.

It is apparent that all types of telephone support are provided only during working hours and not outside of them as is common in commercial websites. Thus, for example, the ePayment site of the Ministry of Transportation has a referral to the ministry's phone support center,

which only operates Sunday to Thursday, from 8:00 to 14:00. Outside of those hours the caller is referred to an automated telephone answering service which deals with driving licenses and car licenses, but does not provide service to users who need help with the Internet. In December 2002 the internal auditor of the Ministry of Transportation wrote to the State Comptroller's Office that a personnel shortage prevents the expansion of the activity of the Ministry's telephone support center, but commented that the ministry is in the process of choosing a private company to extend the support center's hours of service.

2.The state audit revealed that the possibility of receiving support for the use of the ePayment Service is concealed, and users are not invited to do so. Neither is the support user-friendly because it does not always allow the user to receive an immediate answer upon first appealing for assistance, and it is not given at all hours of the day, even though the advantage of this type of service lies in its availability outside of office hours.

In December 2002 the Accountant-General replied to the State Comptroller's Office that "for budgetary reasons, in most offices the connection to the Project does not include its extension outside of office hours [telephone support] ... Because most activity [of the ePayment Service] is conducted during office hours, it does not seem that at this stage it would be right to invest the budget necessary to maintain a support staff nights and weekends."

The State Comptroller's Office commented to the Accountant-General that it is possible that activity is concentrated during working hours because there is no support at other times, and that the Accountant-General's Department should, in cooperation with other government offices, examine the issue of telephone support for government websites including the Government ePayment Service, and the issue of how the

possibility of support is presented, the user-friendliness of the interface involved, and the hours in which support could be given.

Accessing the Internet for Government Information and Services

In order for the public to make use of the information and services that the government provides it on the Internet, it requires, among other things, computers connected to an Internet service provider, and the necessary knowledge to access the Internet. This requires households to expend not inconsiderable sums on buying hardware and software, paying service providers, and learning how to use the Internet.

Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics indicate that as of 2001, 22.5% of the households in Israel are connected to an Internet service provider. It follows that a large number of households cannot use the Internet in their homes for the purpose of receiving information and Government services. The State Comptroller's Office examined government actions taken to enable those who are not connected to the Internet to use it. Following are the main findings:

Public Information Work-Stations in Post Offices

In December 1992 the Cabinet decided to operate Information and Government Service Centers in post offices; the project was named MA'ALEH (the Hebrew acronym for System of Work-Stations for Public Use).

In September 1995 an agreement was signed between the Postal Authority and a private company to establish a network of 30 public work-stations to be set up in post offices. According to the plan, the company was scheduled to complete the development of the work-stations and their installation by the beginning of 1996. The

state audit revealed that the main stages of Project MA'ALEH, due to be ready by the beginning of 1996 were not completed, and work-stations had not been installed in post offices; in 2000 the Postal Authority decided to terminate the project. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, implementation of the Cabinet decision would have improved the service to that population which does not have access to the Internet, would have lessened the workload on government service providers, and would save time and trouble for those who require their services.

Today, government websites facilitate receiving information and obtaining many forms, and the ePayment Service enables various payments to government offices. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, since a large part of the public still does not have access to the Internet, and given the large number of post offices in the country (some 700 branches) and their broad distribution, it would be desirable that the government offices involved, including the Steering Committee and the Postal Authority, examine the possibility of locating self-service Internet work-stations in post offices for the public's use and for the branch to provide instruction and support, in order to download information and government forms, and to make various payments.

In December 2002 the Postal Authority wrote the State Comptroller's Office that "because budget was not diverted to the project from government offices (as promised), and following an analysis of the high costs involved in providing the service, the Postal Authority decided to terminate the project. Today, following technological developments and the presentation of information on the Internet, the stage of gathering information and updating it is easier. Psychological and practical barriers that in the past blocked the project have been removed. However the budgetary problem, and the necessity for government financing, still exist,

especially in light of the financial situation of the Postal Authority and its inability to finance the project itself. From the standpoint of the Postal Authority, it is desirable that the project include the actual provision of government services (not only information). This is how developed countries operate – they provide many government services through the post office. To the extent that the Cabinet decides to activate the project and to allocate budget for it, the Postal Authority will be happy to participate and to utilize the network of post offices so as to increase the public's access to information and government forms, and will implement the steps necessary to do so in the postal units; payments, requisition orders, transmission of completed forms to government offices, etc.”

Community Computer Centers (LAHAVA)

In July 2001 Mr. Sylvain Shalom, the Finance Minister, wrote to Mr. Reuven Rivlin, the Minister of Transportation, that “it has been decided by the Prime Minister and myself, that the government will act to reduce the digital gap, by setting up community computer centers in neighborhoods and settlements where the population suffers from the digital gap.” The document stated that the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister would appoint a project administration to establish and operate community computer centers (Project LAHAVA) and would determine operation procedures. It further stated that in 2002 up to 50 centers would be set up in as-yet-undetermined neighborhoods and settlements, and that the Ministry of Finance would allocate up to NIS40 million to the project; in 2003 no more than 50 additional centers would be set up, and the Ministry of Finance would allocate up to NIS90 million to the project. The document emphasized that if the Ministry of Finance's budget allocations are not sufficient the project administration could mobilize resources from outside the government to make up the budgetary shortfall. It further stated that the

government would finance the operation of each community computer center for a period of three years, after which the centers would be operated by others.

In March 2002 the Finance Minister appointed the LAHAVA project administration. The writ of appointment stated that the project administration would guide the project country-wide, would supervise the body to be set up to run it, would establish mechanisms, using quantitative measures, for determining its success, and would test it throughout the project's implementation. It was further stated that the directors of the project would outline the actions required and prepare both long-term and detailed work plans.

In May 2002 the Cabinet decided, in the framework of its decision "to establish the infrastructure for eGovernment in the State of Israel, to "base support systems for absorbing and disseminating the use of the new information systems to the public through Project LAHAVA, which would reduce the existing gap between the periphery and the center by establishing community computer centers to support the outlying population."

The goals of Project LAHAVA, according to the Project's administration, were to promote the use of information technology in the weaker segments of society in order to raise their general knowledge and welfare, and the quality of their leisure time. The program further stated that the project would provide "counseling and information to citizens in all fields of public and government responsibility including: social security, education, health, ... welfare, finances"; one of the goals of the project is "to encourage the citizen to utilize digitized governmental services, government and municipal information", and to engender savings in workdays and to preclude in standing in line in government offices. To realize the above objectives 100 local LAHAVA centers would be set up, serving some 5,000 people

each; in each one there would be 40 computer Internet-connected work-stations; local information specialists would provide basic knowledge of Information Technology and how to access information.

The state audit found that as of the termination of the audit of this issue in November 2002, only two LAHAVA centers had been opened, and as of September 2002 the directors of the project had not prepared a program or a schedule for setting up 100 community computer centers throughout the country. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office , given the importance of the project for improving citizen services in general and to the Internet-deprived population in particular, it would be desirable that the bodies responsible for it, including the Steering Committee and the Project LAHAVA Administration, take immediate steps to advance the program decided upon.

Telephone Support Centers

In May 2002, in the framework of “Establishing an eGovernment Infrastructure in the State of Israel”, the Cabinet decided “to reduce the existing gap between peripheral areas and the center by ... setting up telephone support centers which would serve that public which cannot take advantage of the government’s online services”.

The state audit revealed that as of November 2002, neither the Accountant-General nor any other government office had taken any actions to implement the above decision. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, given the importance of telephone support centers for improving service to the broad public which cannot use online services, it is desirable that those concerned decide on ways of implementing the Cabinet decision.

According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics, only a quarter of the households in Israel were connected to an Internet provider in 2001. As a result, a major portion of the Israeli public cannot use the Internet in their home in order to receive government information and services.

The state audit on government efforts to set up citizen information centers in post offices, community computer centers and telephone support centers found that Cabinet decisions, taken from 1993 onwards to provide the public greater access to the Internet, have still not been implemented or are still in their initial stages. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, those involved must take the necessary steps to implement the Cabinet's decisions.

Rapidly advancing information technology provides the government with powerful tools for reshaping service to the public, raising its quality, and bringing about significant changes in the functioning of government offices. Several government offices, which had taken such action in 1997-2000, emphasized this and even the Cabinet expressed it in two major decisions taken in 1997 and 2002.

The transition to eGovernment is a complex process; apart from its computer aspects, it affects the organization of government business, secondary legislation, and work procedures; government employees and the general public need to be instructed to

assimilate the changes. In the absence of satisfactory and coordinated treatment of these issues, optimal results cannot be obtained.

In the five years that passed since the publication of the Teleprocessing Committee report and the subsequent Cabinet decision of September 1997, progress was indeed made in using technology to provide the public with services and information: the government enables citizens to receive much information through the Internet on issues within its area of responsibility; to submit requests and complaints; to pay fees, fines, and the like; to obtain publications; and to print forms. However, more complex processes, such as reporting income and expenditures, are only in the beginning stages. The public still does not benefit from many services, which require verifying identities and high levels of security for transmitted electronic messages, pending the full development of means of identification and security.

The services provided by the ePayment Service are being developed separately by each government body; there is no overall program to centralize the services provided by several government offices for the same clientele, thus increasing the motivation of that clientele to use the Internet. The services provided today on the Internet only benefit a small segment of the population, because less than a quarter of all households in the country are connected to the Internet. A project to establish a network of Internet work-stations in post offices was cancelled, while another project, which was supposed to reduce the digital gap in Israeli society by helping those without the means or the know-how to use the Internet, is not on schedule. Nor has implementation begun of the Cabinet decision of May 2002, to establish telephone support centers as a supplementary Internet channel.

The national importance of the eGovernment Project is that it can greatly enhance the service given to the public. Several committees have already recommended, and the Cabinet has even decided, that a supra-ministerial body should be set up to continuously promote it and to maintain a constant check on its implementation. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, the Steering Committee should examine the issue thoroughly and decide if it is capable of fulfilling the function of such a supra-ministerial body, and if not – call to the attention of those involved to the necessity of appointing such a body.

Despite the fact that since 1999 the Accountant-General's Department has promoted the eGovernment Project, in the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office its activities in this regard should be formalized by defining powers, devising work plans, establishing budgetary frameworks, and determining proper supervision and controls. In order to promote implementation and assure the project's success, an overall work plan should be prepared covering all the offices and services concerned, and the project should be assured allocation of the necessary resources; similarly, all the bodies acting in the field should be coordinated, while implementation should be supervised throughout the government sector.

Summary and Conclusions

1. Public services in Israel have developed and improved considerably in the last decade, but a great deal still remains to be done. The rate of growth of the Israeli

economy in recent years and the budgetary and organizational power of the public sector has yet fully impacted on public service. Contact with government offices is often cumbersome, and the service provided may be disrespectful, impatient, given after a long wait, and sometimes physical conditions are unsuitable. There are many reasons for this situation, the chief ones being: insufficient awareness on the part of managers and employees of the need for good service, starting at the top, non-assimilation of the service ethic, outdated management culture and tools, disregard of the quality of service given to citizens, insufficient staff preparation, and insufficient training of personnel.

The general public considers the service provided to citizens in Israel poor. In the last two decades the government has taken decisions and made many and varied recommendations in the interests of improving service to the public. However, state audit findings show that most of them were not implemented. It is reasonable to believe that if they had been properly carried out, the services provided the public would be in a better state than they are today. Decisions and recommendations are not enough; what is needed are steps that will lead to their actual implementation. The question is how to generate change to ensure that quality service is indivisible from the way government functions and how to ensure that government employees will regard the public as a client whose needs must be satisfied.

2. Public service requires modern management tools in every unit and their proper use in a range of tasks. Given that, government offices should prepare annual and long-term work programs for improving their service to the public, including qualitative and quantitative goals and the setting of systematic performance measures as controls.

Some of the necessary actions can, by themselves, improve service without the need for additional budgets (for instance, sending notification that complaints and requests have been received) while some are even likely to engender savings (for instance, transferring the bulk of a unit's work from frontal service to telephone service). Clearly, it is necessary to analyze service improvement from a cost-benefit angle. It is likely that improvements will, in the long term, also reduce costs, as has been successfully proven in the private sector.

Indeed, the public sector can learn a great deal from the competitive private sector as regards providing service. Because of lack of competition in the public sector, the public is generally unaware of the level of service it is entitled to. Very few government offices have prepared public statements committing themselves to a certain standard of service, not necessarily in all areas. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, such public service commitments are very important. They should detail the entire range of services that the public is entitled to, qualitative and quantitative performance measures that the public body commits itself to, and a declaration by the government office of its responsibility to the client (the public). In certain cases, the privatization of service provision, leaving the setting of policy and supervision in the hands of the government body, should be considered. Such privatization has proved itself in the past.

3. Information technology is advancing rapidly. It provides the government with powerful tools for shaping service to the public, raising its level, and bringing about significant changes in the functioning of government offices. During 1997-2000 some government offices indicated its potential and the Cabinet even expressed it in two

pivotal decisions at the time. In the last five years progress has been made in the provision of services and information to the public by means of information technology, and, since 1999, the Accountant-General's Department in the Finance Ministry has taken many important steps to promote the eGovernment Project. Nevertheless, government offices still do not do enough to provide services through the government's ePayment Service, one of the central activities of the eGovernment Project, and the procedures necessary to provide complex services are still in their infancy.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, the eGovernment Project can have far-reaching influence on the quality of service to the public, and therefore the unit which organizes it must have its powers, work program and budgetary framework defined. They should be properly supervised and controlled. In order to implement the project and assure its success, it is necessary to draw up an overall program encompassing all the offices and services involved, and the allocation of necessary resources. It is also necessary to coordinate all the bodies acting in this field and keep track of the project's implementation throughout the public sector.

4. The onus for improving service to the public falls primarily on the government offices themselves and their heads. However an important role should be played by a supra-ministerial staff agency that sets general government policy, develops theory, provides guidance, training, audit controls, etc.

From the state audit findings, it appears that the central staff agencies of the government – the Civil Service Commission and the Budget Department of the Finance Ministry – do not consider themselves as responsible for carrying out these tasks, but

no other body has undertaken them. Consequently, the important issue of whether and to what extent service to the public should be improved is largely left, in fact, to each government office. However, since the offices are not judged by the quality of their service, this is not high on their list of priorities. In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, the absence of a central staff unit responsible for the issue has negative results, and the necessity of such a unit should be considered.

Government offices and employees, who have great power to improve the quality of life of the country's citizens and residents, should build on what has been done till now to improve service to the public, which is one of the main purposes of the civil service. Government employees at all levels must internalize their function as public servants and not public masters.