

Public Interaction

In some of the more civilized countries of this world, public sector employees are referred to as "Civil Servants" or "Public Servants". This is quite natural because their very existence in office is supposed to be devoted to public service. Their salaries are paid for with public funds and in most cases the appointment of senior civil servants needs individual confirmation by the representatives of the people, namely the country's elected Parliament.

One feels a certain sense of encouragement and optimism when a new civil servant takes office, more so when the new face is not from within the ranks of the existing civil service. This optimism stems from the hope that new faces will break with decades old bureaucratic traditions governing interaction with the public especially when such interaction is related to the exchange of information, planning and the formulation of public policy. Unfortunately, this optimism is in most cases short lived simply because the new faces rapidly become masters of bureaucracy after just a very short time in office. Also, as soon as they leave public office, these very same civil servants suddenly transform themselves into champions of reform and vehemently criticize the same lack of interaction and bureaucracy that they practiced in the first place.

Interaction is vital when public servants are entrusted with formulating policies and strategies that will affect current and future generations of citizens. Within the ICT sector, policies and strategies related to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC), the E-Government Roadmap, the Education Initiative and Higher Education Reform are just some examples. All of these require the active participation of all stakeholders from a very early stage of the planning process. The very concept of listening to diverse views and opinions from both experts and laymen alike is the best guarantee to prevent the unwelcome possibility of highjacking the planning process for policies of national importance by certain not so knowledgeable public servants.

While the TRC is commended for conducting public consultation meetings before deciding on key issues, much of the ICT planning in other areas is still being carried out behind closed doors by groups of civil servants that are usually given a free hand in running the whole process. They invoke obscure notions of security and confidentiality complemented with a "we know better than thou" attitude. In reality, policies and strategies are made public only

after they have been officially adopted. Interestingly enough, it is at this stage that such civil servants usually start complaining about the lack of general interest in their pet policies.

Accountability, transparency and public interaction are necessary to assure support and acceptability of policies and strategies. The structure and composition of our civil society has evolved over the years and can positively affect this process, but when it comes to dealing with exchange of information and interaction, it seems that the mentality of most of our civil servants (both old and new) is still very much entrenched in the Ottoman age.