

The On-nara System for Task and Document Management: Scaling Up Back-Office E-Government in the Republic of Korea

Introduction

As the scope of national administration gradually expanded beginning in the 1960s, the Republic of Korea wrestled with administrative inefficiencies and difficulties. Sharing information among different central administrative units such as ministries and agencies was a major challenge. The administrative infrastructure of government ministries was not configured to encourage such information sharing, and bureaucratic silos proliferated. Each central government entity had its own administrative system unconnected with others. Those entities were reluctant to share information with other units. Moreover, the government lacked any internal document repository system to enable officials to monitor different versions of documents produced in the course of policy making.

To address these core challenges of public administration, Korea's first e-government system was initiated by President Kim Dae-jung in 2001, but the system struggled with knowledge management and information-sharing features. Kim's successor, President Roh Moo-hyun started to build up e-government systems, beginning with a system for the Blue House (the executive office of the President), and culminating in an integrated administrative system for the entire government.

Development Challenge

The challenge for Korea was to introduce mechanisms for the effective management of government documentation and thus make the public sector function more efficiently.

Intervention

In 2003, the Presidential Committee on Government Innovation and Decentralization, a major committee focused on all facets of administrative reform under the Roh Moo-hyun administration, first initiated the plan to develop a common electronic internal operations system across the entire government. In 2004, the Easy-One System was introduced as a standardized task and document management system for the Blue House. The system was seen as improving the office's administrative efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Subsequently, the Korean government decided to expand the system to the entire administrative branch with the president's support. In March 2006, the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs (MOGAHA), the main ministry in charge of the development and introduction of the e-government system, developed the Hamoni System, a pilot based on the Easy-One System. MOGAHA introduced the pilot system to five central agencies: the Ministry of Planning and Budget,



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기획재정부
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and Finance

PROJECT DATA

SECTOR:
Governance

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE:
Effective government
innovations; Accountability

DELIVERY CHALLENGES:
Coordination and Engagement; ICT

COUNTRY:
Republic of Korea

REGION:
East Asia

IMPLEMENTATION YEARS:
2003–2018

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the Ministry of Construction and Transportation, the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Korea Coast Guard, and the Presidential Security Service. On the basis of the results of the pilot operation, MOGAHA refined the system, renaming it the On-nara System and scaled it up in earnest by December 2006. By January 2007, the majority of Korea's central agencies, as well as 11 city governments, had begun using the On-nara System.

The On-nara System had three core goals. The first consisted of classifying “all government activities based on their functions and purposes,” positioning each one at the appropriate step of standardized administrative processes—“from collecting data through decision-making to keeping records of results” (Moon 2019). The second involved increasing “transparency and responsibility by recording a history of the decision-making process” (Moon 2019). At each step of the administrative process within government agencies, the On-nara System recorded officials' actions and decisions, as well as opinions on those actions; related data; and any modifications of policies during implementation. The third goal included building a repository of knowledge about the development, implementing policies, and enabling that information to be shared among officials. This goal was seen as particularly important, because “frequent job rotations and bureaucratic silos” had long posed challenges in accumulating and sharing this information (Moon 2019). The On-nara System made it possible for officials (a) to save and access policy information, including records from their predecessors in a particular position and (b) to share information with officials in related agencies (Moon 2019). The On-nara System provides a variety of functionalities to achieve those goals, from recording meeting minutes to designating officials responsible for specific tasks. It also connects a variety of other e-government systems, including those for performance management, local administration, and citizen petitions.¹

Addressing the Delivery Challenges: Coordination, Engagement, and Human Resources

Although e-government is widely seen as an effective instrument for improving the quality of administrative management and public services and for supporting the development of effective, accountable, and transparent public institutions, in practice it is often underused.² In the case of the On-nara System, a number of delivery challenges appeared related to coordination, engagement, and human resources in its government-wide implementation. Because of the transparency enabled by the On-nara System, public officials felt pressure related to modifications in policy and related documents. Their anxiety about being penalized for mistakes in the event of possible audit and investigation decreased interest in using the system. Many government officials also thought that they were being forced to implement the program without their buy-in, and some even thought that MOGAHA intended to use the information in the system to control other ministries. Others thought that the Blue House would take opportunities to engage with their agencies' work. Technically, a lack of interoperability between the On-nara System and the different administrative information systems used by government agencies presented another obstacle. The old system was often less sophisticated and was not integrated with other systems. Moreover, the On-nara System was initially not integrated with the existing approval system (known as the E-nara system).

To address these challenges and to encourage the use of the On-nara System, the Korean government used a number of measures, regulations, and incentives. Monthly use of the system was made a criterion for performance evaluations of both individuals and teams. MOGAHA officials visited agencies quarterly to check use of the system, which was incorporated into performance reviews at the agency level. Measures were also taken to obtain buy-in from the heads of ministries and agencies. The minister of MOGAHA met with other ministers and local government authorities to explain how the On-nara System would “improve efficiency and solve the technological issues they faced with their own systems” (Moon 2019). The strong interest of President Roh, who often spoke of the benefits of the On-nara System in cabinet meetings, was another important factor that led ministers to adopt and implement the system in their agencies.

Even though the On-nara System initially faced criticism from many agencies because of its lack of interoperability with existing systems, MOGAHA improved the system in response to agency feedback. For example, with the

1 For a detailed account of how the On-nara System works, see Moon (2019).

2 On the promise and pitfalls of e-government, see, among others, Moon 2002; Norris and Moon 2005; and UNDESA 2016 and 2018.

introduction of the Hamoni system, complaints were received about the inconvenience of sending documents from one agency to another. In response to this problem, MOGAHA improved the integration of the document release function into one electronic approval system. Also, MOGAHA made efforts to provide technical assistance to officials who experienced difficulties with the new e-government system. There were 120 training presentations at different levels (both at the director and at the general staff levels) for each organization's staff in charge of the On-nara System. These trainings explained specific functions of the system and how to use them in everyday work settings. MOGAHA also opened an online service desk and call center to provide technical assistance, with all feedback taken into account to improve the system's operation and use. An average of 800 issues per month were addressed through the system between January and August 2007 (the period immediately following scale-up to most government agencies). Online education data and system manuals were also distributed across agencies using the On-nara System.

Lessons Learned

The Korean government's success in rolling out the On-nara System across the entire government offers some key lessons that may be applicable to policy interventions that seek to improve public sector functioning.

Balancing Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

The long-lasting success of the On-nara System was attributable to the well-balanced combination of top-down support with a bottom-up approach, thus enabling the successful scaling up of the system. The president's strong interest in the project was an important factor in making the establishment of the On-Nara system a policy priority. The role of MOGAHA and its successor agency, the Ministry of Public Administration and Security (MOPAS), was also critical in promoting the system. Nevertheless, this high level of leadership alone was not sufficient for ultimate success. It was also crucial to have continued efforts by MOGAHA to incorporate users' perspectives and needs into the On-nara System by addressing users' complaints. MOPAS and MOGAHA continually updated and adapted the On-nara System in response to user feedback and preferences. Ultimately, improvements in response to the needs of government officials helped the system meet its purpose, and users rated the knowledge management functions of the On-nara System highly. For example, the On-nara System made it easy for users to access necessary data to share knowledge with other public officials. In addition, when public officials were assigned to a new position, they could track all past data and documents related to their work. This tracking enabled public officials to use the system as part of the knowledge management process, which in turn allowed creative and efficient solutions to problems faced in their work.

"Lending a Hand" Approach

Bureaucratic culture did not change immediately when the system was introduced. For example, public officials often complained about a perceived increase in unnecessary paperwork and preferred to communicate with their supervisors face to face on key issues before they received electronic approval. The approach of providing technical assistance or consultation—what Moon (2019) refers to as the "lending a hand" approach—was critical in promoting use of the new system and reducing reluctance on the part of government officials. Anticipating that users might face a wide range of technical problems with the new and unfamiliar system, MOGAHA reached out to users with training and help desks. This outreach helped government officials become familiar with the system in the course of their work, as they resolved immediate problems and technical issues. Proactive efforts to provide support to users allowed the new system to become routine and to be used across the Korean government as a vital back-office e-government system.

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