
Report on the discussions of cross border portals

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Background

The Øresund region is a truly cross border region and has the interesting property that it includes the capital city of one of its members as its own biggest concentration of population and economic activity. While it is not centrally situated, in European terms, it has an important position in relation to Northern Europe. It consists of the eastern part of Zealand, which is the main island of Denmark, and the South Western part of Sweden called Scania.

In the context of any border is a complex set of geographical, historical, cultural and political circumstances and Øresund is no exception. Historically, the region has seen itself as a single Kingdom with Copenhagen as its administrative centre and the religious centre in Lund. The people regarded themselves as one nationality since Viking times. Sweden annexed the three counties of Scania after war in 17th century. (The following web site gives an overview of this history and is evidence of the animosity that still remains between the Scania region and Stockholm: <http://www.scania.org/>)

One of the results of this history is the fact that the capital of Denmark lies to the east of the country while many southern Swedes regard themselves as Danish. There is a strong traffic of Swedes coming to Denmark every Saturday to shop and to enjoy life in Copenhagen. The traffic across the bridge in the other direction is not that heavy but there is a sympathy between the people on both sides.

The bridge and its impact

The original decision to build the bridge was made about fifteen years ago and was initially justified simply as a transportation link to get Swedish goods to mainland Europe. However, as planning and construction progressed, it was considered more and more as a factor in integration between the south western part of Sweden and the greater Copenhagen area. The thinking that emerged was that by adding the populations of the two areas you gained critical mass for culture, economic development and University life. For example, if you look at the Copenhagen University, it ranks about 17th in scientific output in Europe while the University of Malmo ranks about 32nd. If you combine them then the resulting European rating in scientific output is 8th. Whenever we bring the capacities of the two sides together we generate a significant impact on the position of the region in European statistics: this became the mantra of the "critical mass".

The Demography of Øresund

There are 3.6 million people in the region. The municipality of Copenhagen has 0.5 million inhabitants, with a further 1 million inhabitants in the Greater Copenhagen area. The total Danish population in the region is 2.5 million with a further 1.1 million on the Swedish side. So this brings the whole area to an equivalent size to Berlin and other major European metropolitan regions. The bridge is the single factor that makes this possible and has become the symbol of the joining together what had been divided for four hundred years.

The culture and image of the region

There is a major global design conference (<http://www.index2005.dk/>) in Copenhagen, and design is one of the most important specialisms of the region both in architecture and in the design of every day items. It is also very environmentally orientated, Copenhagen (and Peking) have the highest number of bicycles of any world capital and this is a symbol of the consciousness of environmental issues. The built environment in Copenhagen is a very harmonious mixture of provincial building and fin-de-siècle developments with modern inclusions such as the black diamond extension to the national library. Malmo is undergoing a transformation from a dull industrial town into a new centre for knowledge and science with a new land mark building <http://www.turningtorso.com/> which is becoming another symbol of the Øresund region.

The region's branding organisation, called Øresundnetwork, have produced a "brand manual" to define the Øresund Region, to identify our strengths and what it can offer the world. They came up with the slogan "Business is hot and life is cool in Øresund". Some indicators of the economic strength of the region are:

- The term "Medicon Valley" has been invented to symbolise the concentration of medical research and production in the region.
- Copenhagen airport is the hub for the whole of Scandinavia.
- There is a highly skilled population with 10 years compulsory education and a high proportion of the young population taking higher qualifications.
- We have 15 University Institutions, 100,000 employees in the IT sector and 50,000 in the bio-technology sector which is very significant on a Scandinavian and on a European scale.

The Øresund region represents a significant proportion of the respective economies of Sweden and Denmark and also represents the area with the highest economic growth for both countries.

The Scandinavian life style is recognised as being laid back but in an efficient way and one that is in harmony with the environment. On the more negative

side, however, the Scandinavian view of the world might, sometimes appear chauvinistic. We have had some setbacks in the area of immigration and ethnic problems. A quarter of the population of Malmö, for example, has a non-Swedish ethnic background whereas in Copenhagen the proportion is 12 – 12.5%.

There is a very strong tradition of welfare in Scandinavia, which takes care of people who are not able to take care of themselves. It depends on a high taxation regime but puts a very high value on its human capital and gains a high return on its investment in people. Inward investors consistently cite the quality of life for their employees as the major reason for their choice of location within the region.

Working methods and approach in Øresunddirekt

In 1991, at the same time as the agreement was signed to build the bridge a report was produced called “Øresund the Region” which represented the shared interest of both the Danish and the Swedish governments in developing the region. It concluded that the most important area for development centred on communications between people and with administrations. The most important factor was that of the two different languages. These languages are very similar but there are many people who do not understand the other. There were also significant differences in the two societies and a lack of knowledge about each other. These factors constituted a communications barrier which Øresunddirekt was designed to eliminate.

On the 1st. July 2000, the bridge was opened and Øresunddirekt was launched as part of the same event. The main communications tool it uses is a bilingual web portal as a means of communication to citizens in their own language and, most importantly, to sustain networks between civil servants on both sides through regular workshops.

Half of the staff of Øresunddirekt are Swedish and half Danish. We have no difficulties with language, internally. After a few months immersion in each other's language, Danes and Swedes are able to communicate perfectly well.

The Øresunddirekt approach is based on focussing on the needs of our audience and, in particular, the practical public service needs of the citizen and of the enterprises. This focus, however, requires us to build the relationship with the administration functions on both sides of the border to validate the information we are presenting and to ensure that it helps citizens navigate and access services and administration functions which may not be familiar to them.

While the web site is the most important channel of communication there are three others which are used:

- Face to face services in enquiry centres on Copenhagen and in Malmö,
- A telephone help line,

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- A network of case workers in the administrations and Authorities on both sides of the border particularly in the social security and employment areas who participate in workshops every six months in order to understand the procedures and processes on either side of the border.

The target groups in the audience include cross border movers, for example, in 2004, 4700 individuals relocated from Denmark to Sweden and 3000 in the other direction. Prior to the opening of the bridge, most of the relocations were from Sweden to Denmark in search of work, since the bridge there has been a strong growth of relocations from Denmark to Sweden driven by the costs of housing.

A second target group is the 12,000 cross border commuters. 11,000 of these live in Sweden and work in Denmark many of whom are Danes who have relocated but still work in Denmark.

A third group within the audience consists of small and medium enterprises with about 700 new cross border start-ups each year.

The fourth target group is students with about 1000 cross border registrations each year. The Øresund University has been set up by the 14 University Institutions to promote and assist this process.

Specific information sets are developed and targeted for each of these target groups in the appropriate language.

The main lessons of the first five years

The navigation and structuring of complex bodies of information must be kept simple.

The focus must remain in the needs of the citizen as the user of information not on the needs of the authorities who are the source of information, however, the relationship with administrations and civil servants as the sources and validators of content is essential.

Tools such as check lists and simple procedures which give practical guidance to users are important and it is often useful to produce cross border comparisons which identify and explain the differences in rules and procedures that exist.

Information must be kept up to date and this requires us to use the network of contacts with the Authorities on both sides of the border and with the case worker network. An important part of successful operation is the fact that our informants gain value from the process and are therefore motivated to cooperate in the maintenance of the quality of our shared information.

Finally, the success of Øresunddirekt also depends on political and administrative changes. There are occasions where aspects of the material we publish will point out problems and represent a call for change in procedure or in the law on one side or other of the border but this must be responded to at the administration level.

Some questions of finance and sustainability

Øresunddirekt has not been directly financed by INTERREG or any other CEC programme. It has, and is, however, hosting such projects and provides a vehicle for sustaining their products. For example, Øresunddirekt provides ongoing access to a hand book on company relocation which was originally developed in the INRERREG programme by incorporating its content into the web site and acting as distributor.

In the initial phases of the development of Øresunddirekt there was no resource for marketing but now there is good funding available and there is a strong advertising campaign and involvement in events to promote cross border activities. This has included a radio programme on the Danish national network in which staff members responded to live calls from the public. Other relevant web based information services are encouraged to maintain links to the portal and its material.

The unique visits on the web site have grown from 2000 per month in the first year to 20,000 now which represent 100,000 page hits.

Organisation and governance

The logo of the Øresund region consists of two roughly equally sized oval shapes next to each other; one represents the Copenhagen region and the other represents Scania. The western oval has a large spot representing the city of Copenhagen while the eastern one has a smaller spot representing Malmo. It is iconic of the geography and demography of the region.

At the outset, the Authorities set up two organisational vehicles. Øresunddirekt was the public and business information service and Øresundnetwork was the global marketing organisation of the Øresund brand. Both of these organisations are still in operation. They were originally owned and equally financed by four parties: the Swedish and Danish national governments and the Copenhagen and Scania regional authorities. The initial period of agreement was for three years from 2000 to 2003 at which time there was a planned review and reappraisal of the governance and working arrangements.

These discussions were intensive and resolution was not reached until the last minute. The decision was that the two organisations should continue in operation with the same objectives but that Øresunddirekt should be a Danish financed company while Øresundnetwork should be a Swedish financed company. We continue to have cross representation of the boards but the ownership of the companies have been devolved separately. The very interesting experience of this change is that cooperation has never been better, operation is considerable more efficient and decision processes and strategy development is much more effective.

The equal representation and participation model generated all the expected arguments and fighting over the balance of contribution and the allocation of benefits. The maintenance of balance absorbed much energy and the need for reporting and justification absorbed a considerable amount of resource. All of this was the result of equally shared risk and funding.

The new arrangements are much more effective. There is a letter of intent between the two organisations which define a programme of activities and a framework of mutual obligations. The time of change felt like crisis and set-back but it has turned out to be a major advance and improvement in the way the region is organised and operates.

Discussion

There are important insights in the Øresund experience for the process of transferring project based developments into sustainable mainstreamed activities. While it might be tempting to say that the difficulties of the participative approach could be short circuited, important transformational processes are involved in the struggle that they represent which may be a necessary precursor to the more rational and businesslike approach of separate operations.

This clearly indicates that some sort of maturity model is required through which we can not only tell *what* is good practice but also *when* in the process of eGovernment development it is good practice.

When we ask the question why Øresunddirekt has been a success we must recognise that we are looking at a complex phenomenon which is not simply determined by one or a small number of factors but by the interaction of many circumstances. In the discussions of the first workshop the following factors were examined:

The association of a concrete physical development – the bridge – with a virtual development – the brand – embodied in the channels and content of Øresunddirekt. Did both needed the hype of the other to succeed in the way they have?

There seems to be clear evidence of the emergence of an “information economy” with administrations recognising the need to publish and an audience with a need for specific information and an organisation in a position of organise and intermediate in the information economy.

A complex and clearly very real cultural unity exists in Øresund which transcends the national border.

The scale of the Øresund region where the two parts together create a critical and coherent regional mass but do not exceed it.

The presence of leadership and vision – it is always hard to evaluate the impact of these factors retrospectively but they are always significant in changes such as this.

The relationship with civil servants and administration staff is seen as critical to the success of the portal. They have a need and duty to communicate the content that the portal delivers and so derive value from the contribution they make to it. Nurturing and developing these mutually beneficial network is what ultimately delivers benefit to the citizen users.

Further discussion – the perspectives of the working group participants

Following the discussion of Øresunddirekt, as a case study for cross-border portals, the participants were invited to gather around a single table and discuss the issues arising from the case-study, in relation to their own projects. The discussion was structured around three questions: What challenges do cross-boundary information-services and other e-government services face today? What examples of “good practise” do the participants bring with them from their respective organisations? Who is your target audience?

- What challenges do cross-boundary information-services and other e-government services face today?

Several members of the working group agreed that e-government only really seems to work locally. There is need for a common system, and more cohesion. The problem could be seen as one of interoperability, although some members argued that ‘interoperability’ is more of a technical term, and that the problem faced by e-government is of a more abstract nature, relating to culture, integration and ‘stubbornness’ in sticking to existing practises.

Because of the problems mentioned above, members said, portals often amount to little more than a collection of links to local municipalities. This means that the citizens have to look for more specific information themselves, which is contrary to the idea, promoted by the case-study and in general by the members of the working group, that information aimed at citizens must always take its starting point in the needs of citizens.

One member pointed out that sometimes, even with the information in the right place and with the right accessibility and promotion, citizens can be reluctant to use it. In some cases, the information structure needs to be improved in order to gain the trust of the users.

Another mentioned that e-government always seems to be lagging behind the private sector, which is vexing seeing as government is traditionally seen as a leading actor.

The problem, according to one member, is that cross-border portals are so reliant on political consensus. There are administrative barriers to looking across borders. Often, the knowledge of how to work across borders is 'there', incorporated in the know-how of the 'back office' staff. And yet there is no way to officially make that information available in a structured way to the citizens through the 'front office'.

- What examples of "good practise" do the participants bring with them from their respective organisations?

The ambiguity of the term "good practise" was highlighted by several members, and pinpointed by the example of Belgian e-id cards – a project which is often brought up as an example of "good practise", but which also contained elements that actually made life harder for the citizens. One person's "good practise" can be another's "bad practise".

It was agreed that the administrative hassle of starting up a project can often be a hindrance, at least initially, to achieving "good practise". At the same time, however, it should be taken into consideration that for some groups of people e-government comprises a significant advantage. This, as one member pointed out, applies to people who have trouble leaving their homes because of physical handicaps. For them, e-government could be viewed as "good practise" in itself.

When it comes to e-government copying its success criteria from the private sector, it must be remembered that the private sector deals with another kind of service, in which transactions and profitability are the driving forces. "Good practise" can not be transferred directly from the private sector because "customer relations" in the private sector differ radically from the interpersonal relationships that e-government must be built upon. "Good practise" in e-government should include a sense of public value.

- Who is your target audience?

The problem of administering too much information was discussed. Can a target group simply be too broad to work with? Most members agreed that the mapping out of one's target group is one of the most important step in the creation of cross-border portals.

One member argued that the creation of cross-border portals inherently pose a challenge to politicians, because it forces them to provide a service beyond their natural target-group (constituency etc.).