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Review Article

# E-SERVICES MANTRA FOR THE ASIAN POSTS

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**ABSTRACT**

The primary objective of this article is to help decision makers in Asian posts to have a relook at their respective postal business strategies for the coming years, especially in terms of the role that e-services and technology shall play i n the implementation of plans, projects within their strategies. The article is based on the information of published postal strategies of designated operators in Asia Pacific, survey of 32 officials from different Asian posts on postal strategies and plans. The paper categorizes the challenges facing the posts and then looks at e-services offered by the posts. Next, the author has suggested which e-services have a high potential for success. In conclusion, the author lists out a set of questions which need to be considered by postal decision makers relating to the technology which they wish to adopt for implementing their business strategies.

**Keywords:** primary objective of this article is to help decision.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the great side benefits of working in an International Training Center such as the APPC at Bangkok is that one gets to meet and interact with a very wide spectrum of postal officials, and professionals from the postal industry. It reinforces the bonding of the huge postal "family" since they are beset with common issues and problems and yes, the great unknown of what the future holds for us. I have always been interested in knowing how the rest of Asia is modernizing with the aid of ICTs. That's because I was closely involved with the roll out of 2 key technology projects in India post. Hence, a discussion on E-services forms part of every conversation I have at APPC. E-services are mentioned by most postal officials as a key area of innovation and modernization. However, when I ask people whether the e-services introduced in their countries were successful or popular, the response is always a little cautious, and never overwhelmingly positive or negative.

Actually that's what I'm trying to get at in this paper. I want to show that as far as their long-term strategies are concerned - (a) the Asian posts have very specific goals defined for the next 10 years, (b) they also have some priorities which are decided in consultation with their national governments, (c) that there are a number of challenges coming in the way of achieving the goals, which, the Posts may be aware of or may need an in-depth analysis internally, (rather like an annual health checkup), (d) E-services and technology can help address the challenges - the million dollar question is - which technology and service should we depend on - what's the Mantra?

## POSTAL GOALS AND CHALLENGES

Every post has a vision and mission statement, which is carefully crafted and politically correct, in fact, they appear almost identical. Most of them have been modified or redrafted during the last decade. I made an analysis of the stated visions and missions of about 20 designated postal operators and decided to cull out goals from them and bunch them into the following subsets of goals:

- Enhanced revenue growth and business sustainability
- High quality of service and universal access
- Becoming key player in e-commerce fulfillment
- Modernization of existing products and services, and induction of new technologies
- Innovation through new products and services including being the citizen-government interface
- Promoting sustainable development and reducing carbon footprint
- Improving delivery standards of intercity and rural areas of the country.

Of course, the above sets of end goals are very wide in their scope and priorities vary from post to post. While one post would like to focus on financial inclusion- promotion of banking, remittance and insurance services, another post has prioritized the need to facilitate medium small and micro enterprises (MSMEs) to reach a global market leveraging on postal infrastructure and e-commerce. Hence, whatever the priority of each individual post, the role of e-services and ICTs will be crucial in helping to bring about success - (which is a relative term) but for convenience, success means how far the goals have been achieved based on some sort of measurable outcome.

However, there are a lot of challenges facing different posts which can hinder the achievement of the goals which the posts have set for themselves. In the Asia Pacific Region, there are certain challenges which are staring the post in the face. The list is long but interesting nevertheless. Let's start with the human resource dimension:


**Human and institution capacity cluster of challenges**

- High operational costs of human resources
- Low level of customer orientation
- Growing pension liabilities
- Aging workforce
- Lack of business mindset and resistance to change
- Manpower has low IT skills.

The above list is common knowledge to all of us.

If we go to the next cluster of challenges the picture may be more complex.

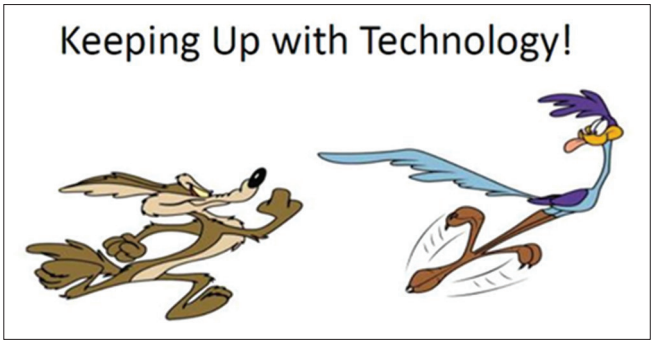
**Policy and regulatory cluster of challenges**

- Absence of Interoperability in International services As compared to Couriers and Global Integrators.
- Universal service obligation
- Regulatory restrictions to introduce new services (e.g., postal banking, postal insurance, international commerce, foreign exchange, and mobile banking).
- Lack of coordination among policy makers and regulators Concerning postal services (e.g., postal, banking, Commerce, finance, transport, IT & Telecom).

A set of challenges more close to my heart is that of the IT infrastructure in place in most Asian posts:

**Postal IT network cluster challenges**

- Outdated equipment and databases
- Lack of integration of IT Infrastructure in posts
- Lack of data analytics, systems, and procedures
- Lack of IT security policy- proliferation of frauds
- Absence of inter-operability between Domestic and
- International (UPU) software
- Poor broadband connectivity in remote areas
- Broadband infrastructure connecting postal system
- Lack of modern devices at point of sale/last mile.




There are also a number of financial and investment-related challenges, certain constraints in the brand image and marketing approach of the posts, issues in the management of infrastructure, decision-making, and supply chain management within the posts. Last, the wider environmental challenges and competition that the posts face.

And of course, there's always the rapid digitization of communications and the related fundamental change in customer behavior on the one hand and the growing competition in all markets including nontraditional competitors (e.g., crowd source delivery, UBER style delivery, using click and collect solutions at their outlets). Oh dear! The Horizons look quite dark don't they? Well, all these challenges have been with us for decades and the posts have adapted and coped (suffering in the process) but the fact remains that this time round, technology selection, and focusing on the strengths can and will make the job of meeting the challenges a little more organized, if not easier.

Posts need to look at each challenge and see to what extent that challenge actually impedes the achievement of the stated goal so for example to what extent, if any, does low level of customer orientation or IT skills impact enhanced revenue growth or high-quality service? Once this kind of mapping is done, one can identify the most critical challenges. The next step is to see how technological intervention can help in mitigating the impact of the challenge or removing the challenge so that the goals can be achieved.

**E-services success stories**

The posts worldwide have made significant progress in inducting technology and introducing e-services to improve their performance and strengthen their position. The success or failure of these initiatives has depended on a mix of factors ranging from planning, budgeting, marketing, piloting, implementation, technology selection and good fortune. In most cases, success has occurred only when all the aspects were properly attended to within a reasonable timeframe.

Over the past 2 decades, the posts in Asia Pacific have successfully rolled out the following services:

(i) Track and trace services for mail products
(ii) Websites with information of services and tariffs
(iii) Online customer service and grievance redressal
(iv) Hybrid mail
(v) Online bill payment
(vi) Electronic money orders
(vii) Online Philately and postal products shoppes [1].

A large number of these services have also been made available through mobile APPs. Most of the services were designed around core existing services of the posts and have been very successful.

**Not-so-successful stories**

A number of well-meaning innovations in e-services could not catch the public eye or were not suited to the times in the Asian region. These were:

(i) Digital postage
(ii) Electronic mail box (Macau China is an exception)
(iii) Online shopping portal (starts with a bang and then goes kaput!)
(iv) Digital certification authority
(v) E-cards
(vi) E-health
(vii) E-administration

**FUTURE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE**

**Big data and the posts**

We are increasingly aware of the importance of data mining and data analytics for businesses for predicting trends and business scenarios. The posts are very large sources of data either directly or indirectly. Capturing meta data from postal transactions, complaints, social media, and online shopping can greatly enhance the customer profiling that is done by the posts. This is a necessary tool for marketing and customer care and overall improvement of quality and efficiency. Wow! Sounds so promising! The post should have actually entered data warehousing long ago in a big way. Anyway as of now, the steps which can be taken now are (a) invest in a suitable data infrastructure technology, (b) data base management itself requires the data which needs to be captured which hitherto was ignored, (c) fraud detection and smuggling and illegal activity detection solutions must form part of the data infrastructure. New algorithms can greatly enhance the fraud detection capabilities of the posts, who are important financial institutions.

An offshoot from the area of big data is the internet of postal things where the posts, through its wide infrastructure can be a source of important data for climate sciences, city planners, and predictive modeling for a number of government agencies [6].

**LTE (A) to 5G telecom evolution**

The international telecommunications union's study report on access technology for broadband telecommunications (2014) has projected that by 2020 the Speed of Gigabits per second will allow smart Homes, offices, and indeed cities to work in a very connected "Internet of Everything"

model. The post office infrastructure and working style will have to prepare for this scenario. Some physical and human infrastructure are always required for e-health and e-governance activities and this can be offered by the post office in Urban and rural areas.

**Logistics rests on an IT backbone**

Dr. Christoph Beumer, chairman and CEO of the Beumer Group, in his article on "Intra logistics" in Postal Technology International (June 2016 edition) has summarized beautifully the basic pre-requisites for logistics providers in the near future, he simply says "We must plan processes with the future in mind and devise safe and reliable technical systems. This will mean more and more processors, user controls, software, and control units. "All of these elements must be integrated into a harmonious, ergonomic, efficient and user-friendly system that can handle the gigantic quantities of data [5]."

**Postal E-services that have a potential for success**

My studies have shown that the following e-services do have a substantial potential for adoption by customers.

(i) Parcel lockers which are smart enough to communicate with customers and the post office network, either self-owned or shared
(ii) Integrated logistics solution - either self-owned or shared with other service providers
(iii) Online shipping and mailing tools for at home preparation of printed stickers and posting or collection by the post office staff
(iv) Prepaid card service that is multipurpose for all transactions and is a certificate of identity
(v) Online customs declaration for business and retail mailers
(vi) Integration of postal web services with e-commerce merchant websites
(vii) Online management of mail item delivery options for customers
(viii) Online money remittance services for cash payment to the payee
(ix) Mobile-based packet and document pick-up service
(x) Performance reports and analytics for business customers especially e-commerce vendors.

In terms of priorities - Modernizing the postal infrastructure and putting in place a next generation IT system which will have centralized or cloud-based processing environment are the most significant pre-requisites for all posts. What constitutes a "next generation IT infrastructure" requires some crystal ball gazing, with a set of consultants and experts who are free from conflict of interest. Basically, all technology should have scope for building up and out as and when required. E-services technology should be selected on the basis of whether it can bring about a desirable outcome. There are some basic questions we have to answer in the selection of a service or technology.

**CONCLUSIVE FINDINGS - KEY QUESTIONS BEFORE SELECTING TECHNOLOGY OR SERVICE OFFERING**

1. Can the service or technology bring about significant improvement in access and outreach of Postal Services? Only a solution which allows services to be universally accessible, i.e., 99% of the country's population
2. Enhanced partnerships: Improved interoperability through the technology among national and international stakeholders and partners
3. Can our posts offer new and innovative services including e-government services through the postal network utilizing this technology? Of course in this case, our solution will have to integrate with the e-government solution fully
4. Is our solution going to bring better access to real-time information for decision-making including monitoring and evaluation?
5. 360° view-is the technology solution giving us an improved transparency accountability and security?
6. Is the solution or service resulting in reduced cost of operations and streamlined processes to reduce operation time? (can be measurable)
7. Does the ICT intervention bring improved work environment, enhanced human capability, and staff satisfaction level?
8. Can the ICT give us enhanced access to markets?

**CONCLUSION**

Selection of appropriate technologies also needs to consider the changing digital landscape, which is witnessing some major transformation that will shape how organizations function in the coming years.

Asian posts are increasingly accounting for greater share in the global postal business. The next generation technologies will help introduce e-services in a cost-effective manner and may help improve the competitive advantage for posts who are quick to adopt them. Serious thought is being given to this subject by the posts in the region. The results will surely be noteworthy!

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