

PORTAL REPORT - FINLAND

1 Introduction

Online information about public services for citizens is provided by [The Citizens' Guide \(http://www.opas.vn.fi\)](http://www.opas.vn.fi) – a service run by the Ministry of Finance. This information is organised according to the different life phases: e.g. children, young people, working population, the elderly, families, immigration and emigration, citizens in Finland and in Europe. The guide is in Finnish, Swedish and partly in English.

In order to improve the quality of the Portal, the Ministry of Finance began in project in spring 2000. The aim of the project was threefold:

- to identify the purpose of the portal in providing public sector information and services;
- to plan the content and functionalities of the portal; and,
- encourage discussion and feedback from users.

There are a number of Portal customer groups that include companies, corporations and public sector organisations. However, the most important customer group are citizens. At the beginning of the project the following requirements were identified for the development of the portal:

- * citizen-focused development of the services
- * usability and accessibility of the content based upon the citizens' needs
- * identifying the benefits for public sector organisations in the delivery of joint-working in the delivery of web-based services?]
- * the development of public sector knowledge in web-services
- * the empowerment of citizens with interactive services
- the promotion of openness and quality of public sector services as well as promoting a positive image of the public sector

The feedback received from the users of the pilot portal was positive.

Following the earlier pilot the new project began in April 2001 to build the operational portal based upon the experiences of the pilot. The Ministry of Finance is the co-ordinator but there is a group of specialists from many organisations who contribute to the project. The main purpose of the group is to improve the quality of the portal (both technical, functional and content). The information content of the portal is based on the Citizen's Guide.

In addition to the governmental portal there is, and will continue to be, other portals that include:

- **Theme portals** - examples are public libraries (www.kirjastot.fi), universities (www.yliopistot.fi) and environmental administration (www.vyh.fi);
- **Specific user group portals** - examples include the provision of administrative services for companies that involve five central agencies developing common access to their services. Other groups include the elderly, children and immigrants, etc.; and,
- **Special geographic area portals** - an example is the Koillismaa regional portal (www.koillismaa.fi).

Regional and local portals are a peculiarity of Finland. It all started in Kuusamo where this municipality developed a local service network for both public and private organisations in the early 1990's in broad cooperation. Currently the Koillismaa regional portal (www.koillismaa.fi) consists of the services of three different municipalities, local state authorities and local private companies.

According to a list compiled by the Severi Project there are about 50 regional or local portals in Finland.. However, these may not all be defined as strictly portals as some of them are more a towns Home Page website rather than a portal.

The Severi Project

(<http://www.intermin.fi/juhta/projektit/localportals.htm>) promotes the development of regional portals and is co-ordinated by the Ministry of the Interiors and the Committee for Information Management in the Public Administration.

The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities has a directory of all municipalities as well as their homepages (<http://www.kuntaliitto.fi>). They are starting a project that will put information about all the municipalities into portal.

Information about these public sector portals, as well as details about electronic public services, can be held and made available from the same web site - the Suomi.fi government portal. The future role of the Suomi.fi portal may be seen as a "root portal" for all the other portals. But at the same time it has to offer a unified picture of the public services to the citizens at a general level. The Suomi.fi portal will be accessible and designed according to national and WAI-recommendations – so it can be seen as an example for all authority web-pages.

The proposed definition:

A government portal may be considered to be a dedicated service that co-ordinates and presents information and services from different, independent suppliers into one interface, typically a web site. The information is categorised in accordance with given criteria, like topics, geography, or other subjects related to the users' needs.

is satisfactory for our purposes.

2 Drivers of change – driving force, incentives and means

The Finnish Government is committed to the development of the Information Society and an integral part of that is the development services.

The Finnish Government prepared the National Information Society Strategy in 1994 –1995. In 1998 a national strategy was published for developing the Finnish Information Society, called “Quality of life, knowledge and competitiveness”.

Finland has been active in reforming legislation that deals directly or indirectly with the information society and electronic services.

1. The Government Programme

The focus in the evolution of the information society is shifting towards the development and production of content-based applications and services. The programme of the present Finnish Government encourages, for example, the further development of electronic services and of cultural and informational content that is easy-to-use, safe and available to everyone. The National Council for the Information Society, which is co-ordinated in the Public Management Department of the Ministry of Finance, follows the progress of the information society and reports back to the Government.

2. Government decisions

The previous Government put into effect (5.2.1998) a decision on electronic transactions, the development of online services and reduction of data gathering (<http://www.vn.fi/vm/kehittaminen/tietoturvaluus/hst/hsteng.htm>). The decision states, among other things, that “the Ministries and agencies will see to it that information on the central services provided for citizens, companies and communities as well as the forms requested by them are available on the Internet and will ensure that a significant proportion of application forms and requests can be instituted electronically by the year 2001.” The costs of data gathering must be reduced.

In April 1998 the Government published a resolution "High-Quality Services, Good Governance and a Responsible Civic Society" (http://www.vn.fi/vm/english/public_management/guidelines.html). It stated, “On all administrative levels, the real possibilities of citizens to influence matters as well as the openness and transparency of administration will be increased.”

3. The Act on the Openness of Government Activities

On 1 December 1999 the new Act on the Openness of Government Activities entered into force (<http://www.om.fi/3470.htm>). The objectives of the Act are to promote openness and good practice on information management in government, to provide individuals and corporations with an opportunity to monitor the exercise of public authority and the use of public resources, to freely form an opinion, to influence the exercise of public authority and to protect their rights and interests.

The Act states transparency of decision-making must be developed through exploiting the opportunities offered by information and communication technology. Official documents should be in the public domain with exceptions listed in this Act or other Acts. A public document is defined as including both written or visual presentations and electronic records. The Act also defines good practice on information management. It sets duties to keep indexes and to make sure that public documents can be easily located, specifications on information systems are to be made available as well as the content. There is also a duty to actively publish information about the activities of the authority.

The Internet is a central tool that can be used to increase the transparency of government.

4. The Personal Data Act

Finland has had a privacy law since 1987. This was updated in 1999 (<http://www.om.fi/1227.htm>) to bring Finnish national legislation into line with the EC Data Protection Directive. In 1998 a data protection law on telecommunications was adopted.

5. The Act on Electronic Service in the Administration

Finland was the first country in the world to legislate on this issue. The Act on Electronic Service in the Administration came into force on the 1 January 2000 (<http://www.om.fi/2838.htm>). The basic objective of the Act was to improve the smoothness and rapidity of the services in the administration, as well as data security. The Act contains provisions on the rights, duties and responsibilities on the administrative authorities and their customers in the context of electronic service. In addition, the Act contains provisions on the most significant requirements of personal electronic identification. Authorities and agencies that have adequate technical, financial and other resources shall offer to the public the option to send a message to a designated electronic address or other designated device so as to lodge a matter or to have it handled. Furthermore the authority shall offer to the public the option to deliver electronically notifications, accounts and other comparable documents and messages. The authorities can sign decisions electronically.

The basic idea of electronic transactions is to minimise the number of transactions through effective data-sharing. A majority of transactions are between companies and government agencies. Data-sharing between authorities and agencies will be developed. Citizens should be given the opportunity to examine their personal data that is held on government databases. The government provides PKI services for authentication, digital signature and encryption and the Population Register Centre was selected as a Certificate Agency. The Finnish citizen was first able to apply for a smart ID card in December 1999. The Ministry of Interiors has made the plans for implementing a smart card for authorities. The first agencies will pilot the card in the near future.

2.1 User orientation

The Ministry of the Interior has carried out two user surveys (1999 and 2000) on the views of citizens towards the delivery of electronic services of public administration. The results suggested that while citizens are familiar with services provided by their own municipality, education or local authority there was little awareness of other public sector Internet services.

The Ministry of the Interior has also carried out a survey on the opinions of citizens towards some regional portals. The results vary by the portal but some general results can be obtained. The attitudes towards their own portal was quite positive and there was frequent usage. The most frequently used services were public services but at the same time they are the services that should be developed mostly. The users gave on average very high scores to their municipal portal.

At the end of 2000 a user survey was carried out on the pilot national portal. A questionnaire was sent to more than 100 users and this included both citizens and civil servants. The results indicated that the citizens were more positive towards the portal than civil servants. The need of the portal was apparent among these citizens. They mentioned that the most important services they would want on the portal were:

- information about public sector organisations and their services
- electronic transaction services by organisations
- organisations contact information

In addition citizens want to send questions to and receive answers from government organisations via the portal

2.2 Other incentives

The promotion of regional portals is done through the Severi Project, which is co-ordinated from the Ministry of the Interior. The purpose of this project is to support, not to order or steer, the creation of sub-regional portals. Exploring financial opportunities is also one of its tasks. Regional and local portals are initially developed by the local and/or regional actors within both the public and private sector. At the implementation stage applications for funding from the government and EU are submitted and quite often they are granted.

The lack of central co-ordination in the creation of authority web-services has been an obstacle in the development of portals. Everything is on a voluntary basis and on the ability of web-service editors to participate. Financial resources vary considerably.

The development and implementation of services is mainly funded through the state budget. The agencies can, within the limits of their own budgets and resources, develop services. No extra funding is available to the agencies apart from a special central fund that has been established for a three year period (2001-2003). The agencies can apply for funding from

this budget if they can demonstrate that they are developing a cross-sectoral service or a service which will benefit several authorities. National portal services are regarded as cross-sectoral services. The Ministry of Finance makes the decision relating to the awards made under this extra funding.

The development of the Suomi.fi portal, the companies' portal as well as the development of the national theme portals is carried out solely by the authorities without the involvement of the private sector. But this is not the case with the local or regional portals. Private companies are involved in several ways in the development and running of the regional and local portals. Firstly the private companies offer their business services through the portals. In this case the development is often done in cooperation between the public and private organisations. Secondly the private companies may be responsible for the operation of the portal, for example as in cases such as Koillismaa.

3 Portals – future development and challenges

3.1 Status and development

To date public sector electronic services have been developed by the public agencies themselves. The guidance and instructions from the ministries has been quite general and minimal. The Ministry of Finance has the responsibility to coordinate the development of services and has concentrated on the development and implementation of the PKI infrastructure and on general data security issues.

The only national portal for public services has been The Citizens' Guide. In the immediate future there will be a growth of portals. This will not just be at the national level but also portals focusing at regional and local level, themes, specific user groups or interest groups, and even for different user Internet access devices. At some stage of these developments, however, economic reasons will start to reduce the number of portals, especially the numerous regional and local portals. The specialisation of portals will continue throughout this time.

The coordination and integration of the use of metadata for online services will be crucial for the existence and survival of the portals. At the same time co-ordinating the integration of portal services is vital.

3.2 Applying metadata criteria

Common metadata is a crucial factor in the development of compatible information systems. Common metadata is needed not just for the retrieval of information but also for the transfer of information between systems. For example, the web sites of the Ministries use common metadata and XML, when transferring information e.g. press releases to the Internet and intranet web sites of the government. Next autumn there will be

recommendations for portals with regards to XML and common classifications.

. The Committee for Information Management in the Public Administration is a cooperation body of municipalities and State administration. It gives recommendations for the public sector on information technology issues. Metadata recommendation for electronic documents was given in 2000 and Finland has chosen the Dublin Core metadata format.

The Finnish Standards Association (SFS) will announce a standard for Net publications and websites. It will also be based on the Dublin Core. But it should be remembered that the Dublin Core is only a format: it has to be adapted for use.

3.3 Future challenges

The challenges of the future are both technical and functional. At the moment any portal has at least two main functions. First it is a tool, a means to help the user to locate the actual service they need. Secondly, the government portal offers the users some functionality across all the services reached through the portal. The role of the portal will change in ways we cannot foresee at the moment.

Technically there are several challenges. There will increasingly be different devices available to users that will have any number of different interface requirements. For example, screen size or the speed of the connection. Currently the portals for WAP, mobile services and web services are separate. It is unlikely that they will be integrated in the short-term. But maybe in the long-term?

The integration of the actual service with the portal is an interesting question. If the integration is loose, the hypertext link is the only connection between the portal and the service. If the integration is tight, the connection between the two has to be made at the application level. The advantage of the tight connection is an increased user friendliness. The disadvantages are the larger expense of the development and the maintenance.

The dual existence of the national portal and regional or local portals creates a problem with the association of the portals and the actual services. In order to offer the same search possibilities within each of these portals the metadata database should be created on all the services accessible through the portals. The metadata should describe all the services in a standard and coherent way.

In order to create portals with the authorities and with the public and private sector a lot of co-ordination is needed. There has to be a common metadata and form standard but also common ways to adapt them (the same key words, classifications etc.). Organizations tend to want to do web-services in their own way in order to distinguish their information or website from another. However, the aim should be to produce the information once and

then deliver it in different ways and channels, for example, through authority's own web-pages, regional portal, governmental portal, subject portal.

The development of search options is also a big task. Should there be a common search engine for public sector organizations? For example, the ability to search by service and region should be possible .

3.4 Portal samples

The site of the Finnish Council of State (Valtioneuvosto)

(<http://valtioneuvosto.fi/> and <http://government.fi>) is the portal site of the Finnish Government. Its sub-site covers the Prime Minister's Office and includes press releases and the Prime Minister's speeches. It provides links to the web sites of the ministries, the President of the Republic and the Finnish Parliament (Eduskunta). It also offers an overview of Finnish history as well as some basic information on Finland's political system. A separate section is devoted to European Union affairs. A search facility is included. This information is provided in Finnish, Swedish and English. The site of the Government has traditionally been aimed more at the media.

Information about public services for citizens is provided by The Citizens' Guide (<http://www.opas.vn.fi>) – a service run by the Ministry of Finance. This information is organised according to the different life phases : e.g. children, young people, working population, the elderly, families, immigration and emigration, citizens in Finland and in Europe. The site also includes links to other governmental websites such as those that provide electronic application forms (<http://www.lomake.vn.fi> - a service of the Ministry of Interior), legal information (Ministry of Justice), service directory with links to administrative authorities' home pages, JULHA - a directory of public sector's contact information (<http://www.julha.fi> – a service of the Population Register Centre), directory of municipalities and links to their home pages (<http://www.kuntaliitto.fi>) service of the Association of the Finnish Municipalities) etc. The guide is available in Finnish, Swedish and partly also in English.

The Citizens' Guide is currently being developed to become a true citizens'/government portal by the beginning of the year 2002. A planning project and a pilot version of the portal have been finalised and the construction of the new portal is underway within the Ministry of Finance. New, more interactive elements (like discussion areas) will be introduced as well as multiple ways of searching for information. The idea is that this portal will become the main gateway to the Finnish administration. It is being developed in co-operation with all public sector organizations and existing government portals will be either linked or merged into it. The portal will be launched in Finnish and Swedish and at least partly in English.

A2B portal is to be launched in summer 2001 by a project run by the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Further details of the content and functionalities of this portal will soon be available.

The Committee for Information Management in the Public Administration is a cooperative body of municipalities and State administration that has launched the Severi Project for the support of sub-regional on-line services. The main task of the project is to promote the creation of sub-regional portals that are significant from the point of view of regional policy. All municipalities should belong to a regional or sub-regional portal. If a portal is not built, this will not promote the position of a particular sub-region in comparison with other sub-regions. The Severi Project thus gives general support to municipal decision-makers. The project also commissions or participates in different kinds of reports concerning the support for building or using sub-regional portals. Exploring financial opportunities is also part of its tasks. When portals become more common, it is possible that related practical or technical recommendations will still be drawn up.

In addition to the government and regional portals there are some theme portals such as public libraries (www.kirjastot.fi and www.publiclibraries.fi), universities (www.yliopistot.fi) and environmental administration (www.vyh.fi).

The library portal.fi is a gateway to the networked services of Finnish Public Libraries. At Publiclibraries.fi you can find all [Public Libraries in Finland](#), search their [online catalogues](#) or search for [staff by name or region](#). The site offers information about [the Finnish Library System](#) and helps to find [information about Finland](#). You can also [send a reference question concerning Finland to a Librarian](#) over the Internet.

The university portal gives information about the science and art universities, the news, education and research.

The environmental portal is a common portal of the Ministry of the Environment, regional Environment centres, Environmental Permit Authorities, Finnish Environment Institute and The Housing Fund.

The common portal of the authorities forms (lomake.vn.fi) gives access to the forms of different authorities and municipalities. It consists of a common metadata database and search options are available. The forms are held on the servers of the form producers.

The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities has a directory of municipalities and their homepages (www.kuntaliitto.fi) and now they are starting a project to bring all the municipalities into the same portal.

Koillismaa network (www.koillismaa.fi) is one of the oldest regional portals comprising the services of three municipalities, local state authorities and local private companies.

Kauhajoki regional portal (www.kauhajoki.fi) received the highest score from its users in the survey carried out by the Ministry of Interior on the attitudes towards the regional portal. Kauhajoki itself is a municipality in western Finland but the portal serves the citizens of 11 municipalities.