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The impact of online Freedom of Information tools: What is the evidence?

Part 3. Critical success factors

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This report, and accompanying material, can be downloaded at
http://mysociety.org/alaveteli-research

1. **Use Alaveteli:** Unless the very level of transparency is an issue (e.g. for journalists) the consensus was that it was better to use Alaveteli software than build one's own platform. As Pedro Daire from Chile said "Costa Rica, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina [approached us for advice]. But we knew that our technology wasn't good enough to be reusable so we only keep on [giving] the [same] advice: and we advise to install Alaveteli". Andrei Petcu advised, "Subscribe to the Alaveteli developer mailing list, and ask questions there. Those people are awesome, they answer in two days maximum" (Romania).

2. **Think about your aim:** As mentioned by Fabrizio Scrollini (Uruguay) – it's crucial to think about what the end aim is. In most cases, the Alaveteli install is not about getting data, but rather to raise awareness of FOI and so it is effectively a campaign tool. If this is the case, the focus should be on promotion.

3. **Invest in promotion:** Some Alaveteli and non-Alaveteli implementers have great experience in bringing stories to the media, blog writing and so on (Hungary, Spain, Ukraine and in the case of non Alaveteli, MuckRock and Open Data Georgia). They could provide training for others.

4. **Launch with an event:** Launching at a critical time or around a critical issue was key – whether during election time, or during a particular scandal. This gets a "hook" for the platform to generate publicity. The implementers in Bosnia felt that not doing this may have been one of the reasons the site was static and fell into lack of use.

5. **Connect with the Alaveteli community and wider FOI community:** Alaveteli is not just about the software, but the community. As Andrea from Italy says, "If you're going to have a platform with other people and other countries, [it] is much easier for us to understand how we can improve the platform, we can see best practices abroad and then you feel part of a community doing the same things. It's much more powerful, the message you can send to your audiences in Italy if you're part of a bigger community abroad. And people care a lot about these things on strategic, kind of strategic way to advocate for access to information, having a platform used by other people around the world … That's why it's important to work together with a national organisation and the international community." There is a general feeling that being part of a broader international community brings more motivation for all (also mentioned by Stefan Wehrmeyer, Marietta Le, Michael Morisy). However, the feeling was that mySociety needs to work on non-technical support more, mentioned by Stéphane Guidoin, echoed by Marietta Le (e.g. more interaction through conferences) and Richard Hunt (providing a starter pack of sorts).

6. **Partner with an organisation:** This was admittedly more problematic given the two sides' different agendas, but a common suggestion was to partner with journalist organisations.

7. **Get government on your side … somehow:** Although there is no answer as to whether being collaborative or adversarial with government is a better strategy, one clear point is to recognise there are more and less progressive government departments.

8. **Think about your business model:** How sustainable is your project? This is one big question that most organisations had not even reached the stage of asking, with the exception of MuckRock in the USA (non-Alaveteli).

9. **Expect to put it in the work:** As mentioned by Pedro Daire of Acceso Inteligente, running an FOI platform is time-consuming. Although some sites had less ambitious aims (e.g. New Zealand and Israel), others had not anticipated the amount of work needed – from simple but tedious tasks like collecting all the email addresses of the necessary public officials, to the more challenging financial and administrative backing of any appeals processes.

10. **It's not about the technology:** It's all about raising awareness and persistently questioning (what Nir Hirshman calls "trolling" government) and realising that "it's [FOI technology] not a new process – you are embedding it in a process that already exists" (Gabi Razzano, South Africa).