MARKETPLACE SHLOMO MAITAL

Getting future ready

Israel may be a land of hi-tech milk and honey but when it comes to public services it has yet to enter the 21st century

I HAD two encounters with the government recently.

First, I renewed my passport. I went online, downloaded the form, filled it out, zapped it to the Interior Ministry and received my new passport in the mail in no time. Grade A+ to a ministry not always highly regarded. Second, I received a snail-mail love letter from the Income Tax authorities telling me to show up pronto, in person, on a set day and time. It turned out to be a misunderstanding, cleared up by my accountant. Grade B+ to an unloved, but crucial, department, mainly because as an economist, I know the sad fate of governments (like Greece) that can't collect lawful taxes.

When will Israel, the so-called Start-up Nation, the land of hi-tech magic, modernize its government services and ministries and bring them into the 20th century (let alone the 21st)? When will the people of Israel enjoy e-government in all its interactions with public services?

To be fair, rapid progress has been made recently. In June 2012, Israel won a United Nations award, joining the top 20 nations in the world in providing Internet services to the public – a rise from 26th to 16th place in just a few years (the top five countries are South Korea, the Netherlands, the UK, Denmark and the US, in order). The charge was led by former minister Michael Eitan, responsible for improving government services and the most "wired" and pro-tech of all politicians. Eitan chose not to run in the 2013 Knesset elections.

I spoke with Carmela Avner, the government's former chief information officer (CIO). She was appointed by former finance minister Yuval Steinitz in March 2012 to be the government's first CIO, a position every hi-tech company fills, but brand new for Israel's public service. She spent 18 months building the government's e-government information infrastructure so that the government can interact with individuals, businesses and other organizations online, smoothly, efficiently and even enjoyably.

On September 12, Avner tendered her resignation to Finance Minister Yair Lapid. In the few months since Lapid took office, eight top Finance Ministry officials, including Avner, have resigned. Apparently, Lapid prefers to consult with his own experts rather than those of his ministry. She does not yet have an official replacement.

Avner boasts a stellar career in hi-tech. She worked for Scitex, one of Israel's first hi-tech successes, was an information technology manager for Teva Pharmaceuticals

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for 10 years, headed global operations for Raanana-based NICE software systems, worked for ECI Telecom and Ness Technologies, and chose to enter public service in 2012. I interviewed her by email – appropriate for the subject we discussed.

Why did you choose public service? What does the new CIO position entail?

"As a citizen of this country, I saw a great opportunity to harness my skills and experience to the public sector, to influence the domain I understand most – information technology and organizational processes, deploying technology in the areas of public service improvement, public sector efficiency, and the impact the public sector has on the economy and activity of IT in Israel.

"And all of this in light of the values of open government – transparency, accountability, public participation. Our goal was to bring Israel into the top ranks of the nations that leverage IT to improve services for citizens and businesses, and to make the government future-ready."

As CIO, you were in charge of government information systems. This is a massive task – there must be a very large and scattered body of data that you need to understand and organize. How did you do this?

"Funny as it may sound, I began every morning with the newspaper. I am a citizen of this country and a citizen of the modern world, and I am always curious and excited by the next new things. Basically, my learning was in the following cycles: Internal – the first people I learned from were the people I work with – the actual state of things, the needs, dilemmas, challenges, strengths, and

mostly the dreams. Next, I learned through the establishment of different professional forums of the CTOs [Chief Technology Officers] and a small forum of an advisory board.

"And of course, through lots of meetings with government officials, suppliers, global ICT specialist firms and studies from the world, best-practice benchmarks of other governments, through other government officials and reports, such as those from the OECD and World Bank. I conducted a SWOT analysis [analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats] and convened a group to work on our vision and mission. And, at the end of the day, I learned the decisions I had to make through my work and through taking responsibilities."

We all know that our young people are light years ahead of their teachers, parents and

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Carmela Avner: Left a significant legacy

You joined other highly capable women at the Finance Ministry in a highly male dominated ministry. Can you speak about your personal experience, as a wife, mother, and senior executive, and how did you deal with the challenges?

"Well, it seems that most of my career, I was a minority. Today in the Finance Ministry there are more and more women in significant economic positions, many of them in the ICT domain. I find that there are different styles of women managers. Some adopt a more aggressive attitude, others do not fear to bring their feminine virtues. I was always motivated by a passion that my work should be meaningful, have an impact, and, of course, be interesting; and to this, I brought all my energy and passion.

"As a young mother at Teva, one of the more senior managers told me once that I am one of the few people he knew who had the right balance between family and work. That was a great compliment for me. My family is the best project I ever had and I deeply believe that due to my work, I can share more with them and have more areas of discussion. I have three boys and I learn so much from them and that really helps me to do a better job. I also insist on having weekends and vacations with all of them. I deeply believe that creating common experiences and treating them as equals in terms of what I can learn from them creates a family I deeply love and appreciate. Honestly, I could have not have done any of this without a very supportive husband."

Despite her resignation, Avner feels that she leaves a significant legacy. In her resignation letter, she notes among her achievements the new IT division she set up, the cross-ministry shared ICT services for government, a first-ever emergency exercise testing responses to a cyber attack, initiation of a paperless government project, a digital government library, integrating start-ups in public services, and many other projects.

The effort to create and strengthen e-government will continue. One day soon, Israel's digitized public services will, like Israel's hi-tech start-ups, proudly enter the 21st century. And Avner will know she has helped "government" join a long list of nouns – phones, pods, pads, mail, books – with an "i" or an "e" as a prefix. ■

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the Ministry of Education bureaucracy in their use of digital technology. They are all glued to their smartphones and tablets. This makes it hugely difficult to modernize the educational system, in part because so many teachers are deeply fearful of it. I believe you must encounter this in government as well.

"You are perfectly right; the responsibility of the government is to enable accessibility to the entire population. We worked on multi-channel accessibility. The traditional ones are service centers, phones and faxes, but we also worked on more advanced channels such as kiosks, mobile applications and Internet sites, social networks and more. We also ran a program called Lehava [Flame] to bridge the digital gap in the very low socioeconomic areas, aimed at young children and the elderly population, where we teach them the basics of how to use computers and basic software applications.

"As for the Ministry of Education, they do run some programs to train teachers to work with digital materials. They initiated an educational system based much more on the new unlimited capabilities technology can provide. In terms of educating government officials, we planned to initiate an IT cadets program, to bring more tech-oriented and 'Open Gov'-oriented people to the Civil Service."

How will the CIO make it easier for citizens to access services directly?

"Well the CIO has the tools and budgets and know-how to implement processes and ser-

vices in order to reduce bureaucracy and increase efficiency – even new services based on personalization, based on the new biometric smart ID. Also, I had under my responsibility the unit for improving service to the public, the unit that former minister Eitan established.

"However, tools are not enough; regulations should be changed and attitudes on how we can make change happen. It is a process and cannot happen overnight. Without very strong political backing and a champion, it will be very difficult to make a real change."

Your job involved coordinating among many ministries, working with ministers from different parties who do not always get along too well. How did you navigate the political stormy waters?

"I came to the government to lead a professional unit and was chosen on a professional, non-political basis. I found that if one sticks to one's vision, professional and personal truth, at the end of the day that is what works. We live in a digital era that will only become more and more amazing. The public sector along with civil society understand that this is the world we are living in and we have to embrace it – in order to have a much better link to the citizens and to the public. You are right; one has to acquire a new set of skills. The term negotiation takes on a new meaning and there are many interests involved that one has to identify in order to understand how things work and build coalitions."