

# The Compass of Transparency

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**Organisation:** The Presidency of the Council of the Ministers

**Country:** Italy

**Level of government:** Central government, Local government, Regional/State government

**Sector:** General public services

**Type:** Communication, Digital

**Launched in:** 2012

**Overall development time:** 60 days

**Link to the innovation's website**

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# Description

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The compass of transparency is an automated online instrument that gives citizens the possibility to monitor, in real time, the implementation of all the data and information requirements imposed by the Italian legal transparency framework. Moreover, the users can express their own opinions about the quality of the published information. These opinions are immediately made available online, in social mode, so that everybody can use them. The aim is to support the government, through the direct involvement of citizens in the continuous improvement of the quality of online and digital services. It is a system of rules, processes and technologies that combine the three basic principles of open government: Transparency of public administrations, citizen participation and collaboration.

The initiative focuses on the continuous improvement of transparency compliance in more than 20 000 Italian public administrations, with returns in terms of increased efficiency, reduction of corruption and lower costs across the whole public sector. The heart of the system is a validation mechanism, composed of software sensors and mathematical algorithms, with the ability to analyse public administration websites in both real-time and at certain intervals. The analysis is performed by comparing the found data and information with contents defined and standardised by the laws of transparency and guidelines on websites. Data are then collected in a data warehouse that is able to provide different types of users (public administrations and citizens) with results on the transparency compliance of all institutional websites.

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## Why the innovation was developed

The Italian legislation about transparency has been significantly evolving in recent years in response to the pressure from public opinion, asking for a solution to corruption in the public sector and for detailed accounting for public expenses. The legislator has obliged the public administrations to publish information and data on their institutional websites. The websites have become the main place where transparency is guaranteed. The transparency obligations have gradually grown to the considerable number of 60. In this context, the need has arisen for a tool that gives the administrations the possibility to easily fulfill their duties regarding transparency and, at the same time, that guides citizens in finding the information they are looking for. As a matter of fact, the high number and heterogeneity of Italian administrations, combined with the amount of different transparency obligations, represented a barrier to the effective use of the published information by the final users. Therefore, the goal of the Compass of Transparency is to minimise the difficulties encountered by the users in finding and using the information and data published, and at the same time, to represent a tool that monitors the transparency process at both the regional and national level.

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## Objectives

Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve access, Increase citizen engagement

- Place citizens at the centre of the transparency process.
  - Respect the technological and organisational autonomy of public administrations in order to not cause additional costs.
  - Guide the citizens and the administrations in the web transparency field.
  - Promote friendly control and participation of citizens to increase the level of transparency of public administrations, through the effective use of social media and new technologies.
  - Make transparency control of the administration more efficient and effective.
  - Increase the accountability of public administrations and prevent corruption.
  - Give citizens faster access to information and at the same time, improve the external communication of public administrations towards citizens.
  - Engage citizens, through the integration of social networks, so that they can contribute to the social control of transparency of public administrations, by giving warnings and by posting opinions about the quality of published information.
  - Develop a real-time dashboard about the state of transparency in all Italian administrations and monitor compliance
  - Offer functionalities that rank performance and make comparisons between administrations, in order to push towards healthy competition between them, which should bring about maximum levels of transparency.
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## Main beneficiaries

Academia, Civil Society, General population, Government bodies, Government staff

- Citizens are the main beneficiaries. The system puts the citizen first, both as a user of transparency and as a contributor to the increase of transparency in public administrations. The Compass gives citizens the possibility to check, in a simple and uniform way, if the contents indicated by the transparency laws have been published or not by the public administrations.
- The compass gives support to the whole public sector (over 20 000 Italian public administrations), simplifying the way to reach transparency compliance. And thanks to this opportunity, the administrations feel that they are more controlled by the users, and this feature constitutes a strong weapon for corruption prevention.

# Results

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## Efficiency

It is difficult to estimate an improvement of efficiency in the case of the Compass of Transparency. However, one example is that in order to monitor 66 legal obligations on a website, usually an employee would take at least 30 minutes of his work, and considering that public administrations' sites are over 20 000, some consideration (in terms of man / hours resources allocated) can be taken into account. In particular, the monitoring and verification of the compliance of 20 000 websites is likely to need: 10 000 hours, corresponding to about 1 250 man-days, or to more than 5 resources per year. The automatic system monitors all sites in a few hours (6-8), and guarantees the immediate ability to undertake any corrective actions that could be necessary both at the political and organisational level. Besides that, the verification of the single site can be done in real time in just 5-6 seconds. Also, with this tool, it is possible to understand how the implementation of the transparency proceeds in the whole public sector, in real time (with daily updates) and on behalf of all kinds of users. Without this functionality, it would be necessary to employ 5 human resources for one year, in order to give a result that would already be soon obsolete.

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## Effectiveness

Before the Compass of Transparency went online, it was not possible to measure the state of transparency in Italy except through unreliable sample surveys. In a year of activity of the Compass of Transparency, the compliance to the disclosure requirements has grown by 40%, and continues to grow. It will then be helpful to check whether or not the increase of the compliance corresponds to an effective and measurable improvement in performance and a risk reduction in terms of corruption. To this purpose, the possible correlation is under review, with appropriate indicators defined in such a way as to be aggregated directly from sources of information online.

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## Service quality

### Accessibility:

The standardisation of the transparency requirements and their online availability - without any authentication mechanisms - guarantees substantial improvements in the quality of the provided services depending on the target audience. In fact, in the case of public administrations, the Compass simplifies access to the contents, if published according to the technical standards, and ensures a quick and easy adjustment with respect to transparency compliance. On the other hand, in the case of citizens, the compass improves access to information related to the transparency requirements, because the contents are standardised and the users know, in a simple way, how to find information on PA websites.

### Reliability:

The verification of the Compass of Transparency is carried out in automatic mode and, as such, it might be subject to some errors. To this regard the compass offers a number of additional features that enable continuous improvement in the transparency of online published information and services. The citizen can in fact enter the system through a social login, and express opinions on the quality of the information related to transparency requirements and towards errors detected by the compass. This way a genuine process of participation and collaboration is activated, where the human factor supports the automatic control in order to improve transparency and efficiency of public administrations, resulting in a reliability increase of the instrument.

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## User satisfaction

The users of the Compass of Transparency are, as already mentioned, public administrations and citizens. As far as public administrations are concerned, after the go-live of the compass, continuous and positive feedback from them has been received, through email, phone and web-based comments. Public administrations have highly appreciated the initiative of making this tool available, which is very useful in providing help and guidance considering the high number of requirements. As far as citizens are concerned, several groups, associations and members of civil society have given positive feedback. Satisfaction has particularly been expressed by a subset of citizens (journalists) who now daily use the Compass of Transparency, even for the thematic focuses on local public administrations, helping to stimulate - within the public opinion - the importance of transparency.

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## Evaluation

The Compass of Transparency has been included in the list of the 47 EPSA 2013 Best Practice Certificate Recipients, for the award "Weathering the storm - Creative solutions in a time of crisis".

The evaluation process used was the "The EPSA 2013 assessment and evaluation methodology".

<http://www.epsa2013.eu>

# Development

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## Design

The idea that has led to the development of the Compass of Transparency comes from an official ICT expert, who is still active in the Public Administration Department (of the Presidency of the Council of the Ministers). In particular, it was decided to develop a system of rules, processes and technologies allowing both the standardisation of the publication requirements regarding transparency, and the use of advanced ICT tools. This is in order to ensure the continuous automatic monitoring of the transparency compliance (to the Decree n.33/2013) on all the Italian public administrations (more than 20 000 public administrations, highly heterogeneous). Beyond this, the basic idea was to define mechanisms for engaging public administrations through instruments that could enable healthy competition, and for increasing participation and cooperation among citizens. This idea has led to a new paradigm, where, thanks to the compass of transparency, public administrations are more transparent and citizens can participate and cooperate for their continuous improvement. On the other hand, the department can measure, at real time, the trend of transparency, identifying corrective actions in terms of public policies, in order to continuously improve the implementation of standards. So the idea was born completely within the department, mainly pushed from the need to “measure and decide.”

Design time: 10 days

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## Testing

The Compass of Transparency has been first tested by technicians and by experts. It's useful to distinguish two different aspects: the testing of the employed technologies and the innovation itself. With regard to the testing of the technology used, the design, development, testing and on-line commissioning of the functionalities of the compass of transparency have followed an iterative and incremental process. The substantial part of the testing work has been done so far and will continue to be done in future, directly by the end users (citizens and public administrations). The system is always online in “beta permanent” state and users themselves can continuously notify any malfunctions. This leads to the correction of errors and to a new release of the software.

As far as the testing of the innovation is concerned, it is worth pointing out that when the system was put online, it was not sufficiently advertised. This has led to a gradual increase in the use of the instrument and of the innovation by users, ensuring a proper governance at all levels: social, political, organisational and technological. Then, once all the potential problems and possible solutions have been identified, we have tried to spread the use of the instrument, through both communication campaigns and a strong political commitment.

Testing time: 15 days

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## Implementation

### Tools used:

The Compass of Transparency is based on a framework of rules, processes and technologies. This verification is carried out in a simple and understandable way even by non-experts and is based on an automatic comparison with the standards of publication set out in the framework of rules. In this way, the citizen can understand and learn more about his town and the world of public administrations; professionals and researchers can make statistics and studies on a range of issues regarding the world of public administrations' phenomena. The heart of the system is software that analyses websites automatically. The system automatically analyses the html code. Data is collected in a data warehouse, which through dedicated interfaces (graphical dashboard) and a simple “click” is able to provide to different types of users the trend of transparency in all the Italian public sector.

### Resources used:

The Compass of Transparency project has been divided in two phases:

- Phase A – Design, implementation and "go-live" of the system has been followed by one internal human resource, with technical-organisational experience, that has developed the concept idea and defined the technical issues, including the software and system specifications. The department has acquired the “all inclusive” service of development of the Compass, from an external software house. The budget has been EUR 24 000. The system has been developed and activated in three months from the starting date of the project, thus respecting the contractual schedule.
- Phase B – Operation, maintenance and evolution of the system includes the services needed to guarantee the full functionality of the system, its functional evolutions, and the continuous match with the needs of users. The annual budget for these activities includes the usage of resources internal to the department and services committed to an external supplier. The governance and management of the “Compass of transparency” needs two internal human resources, for about 100 days/year, for a total cost of EUR 15 000 per year. In addition to this, a contract has been activated for the “all inclusive” web hosting service, the software and system management, the development of the new features defined by the DFP and for the operative support, both to the public administrations and to citizens. The cost of this contract is EUR 20 000 per year.

Implementation time: 15 days

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## Diffusion

The Compass of Transparency has been designed and developed in order to be completely and easily transferred into different administrative contexts, e.g. in other countries. This is possible thanks to the simple methodology, in terms of rules, processes and technologies, which the compass is based on. Indeed, the compass' rules and indicators used during automatic checks can be defined inside a simple XML configuration file. Therefore, it is possible to replicate the compass in a completely different environment, where there is a different institutional organisation and where there is different content to be published according to the laws. Moreover, the compass can be expanded in order to perform monitoring at the international level. Accordingly, it would be possible to create an international federated system about "transparency compliance" comparing benchmarks among different countries.

Diffusion time: 20 days

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## Challenges and solutions

The challenges encountered mainly concerned:

- The standardisation of the access to the content relating to transparency requirements, especially considering the high number of public administrations and their heterogeneity. To tackle this, the standardisation of syntactic elements subject to publication was promoted.
- The introduction and activation of competition among public administrations that would ensure the process of implementation of the transparency rules of institutional website. To tackle this challenge, competition among public administrations (classification and comparison between different administrations) was enabled through a phase of testing and tuning features designed, in order to optimise and share the opportunities offered by the functionalities. Improving the transparency has been increased with the introduction of these tools.
- It was hard to involve citizens in the monitoring process of transparency. To deal with this problem the instrument has been delivered through the major social networks, twitter, facebook, etc. Subsequently, many citizens have come spontaneously together into groups and have begun to monitor public administrations' websites. These monitors have also led to a report which was sent to the authorities in charge, with a deep institutional control. As a consequence, many public administrations have contacted these groups to get support for improving transparency. So civil society has actively supported public administrations.

# Lessons Learned

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## Lessons Learned

- In order to ensure the implementation of the rules, it is necessary to identify dedicated instruments and to accompany the process of transparency, by continuously measuring results.
  - It is important to ensure the correct collaboration and the adequate involvement of the resources relating to various components (lawyers, technologists, economists, humanists, communicators, etc.) in the innovation projects of public administrations.
  - It appears rather convenient to converse with stakeholders and enable the co-design of services as much as possible, also through innovative tools such as "Open Space Technology".
  - It is better to use, as much as possible, simple software development processes, in continuous contact with clients (extreme programming, agile methodology).
  - Careful attention is needed during the diffusion and dissemination of the initiative, by activating adequate processes communication, also through social networks, and involving associations that can both help and support the implementation of the project.
  - It is extremely useful to activate processes and tools that enable the competitiveness among public administrations.
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## Conditions for success

- The ability to define standards and rules and combine them with technology.
  - A strong commitment from the government on issues related to transparency and to open government.
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## Other information

Since the Compass of Transparency is a free tool (available via web to everybody) and its usage is extremely easy for all, it opens the way to innovative forms of collaboration between government and citizens. For instance, the compass could be used to effectively communicate the theme of transparency to the students that could be informed about their rights in terms of transparency and, at the same time, contribute to the assessment of the quality of the published information. This exercise can be done individually or as a school project, for instance.

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