Proposed Framework for Official Document Sharing and Verification in E-government Environment Based on Blockchain Technology

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Abstract:
Progression in Computer networks and emerging of new technologies in this field helps to find out new protocols and frameworks that provides new computer network-based services. E-government services, a modernized version of conventional government, are created through the steady evolution of technology in addition to the growing need of societies for numerous services. Government services are deeply related to citizens’ daily lives; therefore, it is important to evolve with technological developments—it is necessary to move from the traditional methods of managing government work to cutting-edge technical approaches that improve the effectiveness of government systems for providing services to citizens. Blockchain technology is among the modern technologies highly suitable for developing digital governance services, and its technological ability to sustain information stability is vital in digital governance systems since it improves integrity and transparency measures while preventing corruption. In this study, computer networking protocols are built to form a peer-to-peer network framework for managing official documents. using blockchain technology was built to illustrate how any element of government work may be developed using it. The suggested framework comprises the addition of a new official document, and the verification of an existing document. The system was created in socket programming using Java and tested the response times for many simultaneous requests. The system was tested using transactions per second (throughput) measurement. The result showed that the proposed system processed 200 document verification transactions within 50 seconds. In addition, the test of the proposed system presented the time required for document retrieval—about three seconds to answer 100 document retrieval transactions. Furthermore, the results of throughput were compared to the results of the same measurement of some popular applications such as bitcoin. And the result of the proposed system was within the average value of output throughput of the other compared applications.

Keywords: Blockchain Technology, Computer Network, Distributed System, E-government, Peer-to-Peer Network.

Introduction:
The continuous developments of computer networks take variant approaches of work. Some of works is focusing on improving existent technologies, other works focuses on developing novel technologies in computer network to allow for providing new types of services 1,2. Virtually all elements of business and governmental work utilize the Internet or computer networks, and the digital transformation of these sectors has highlighted the importance of sharing sensitive and dangerous information safely. Although email, web applications, and the Cloud are commonly used to share information, relying on a third party to transmit data in particular applications may not be an option. As a result, the need to deploy a system that can be utilized to share data in a controlled and private manner has arisen. To fill this void, blockchain technology emerged as an Internet trust protocol. Apart from its capacity to share data in a controlled and privacy-preserving manner, blockchain includes immutable records of transactions among a network of nodes. The history of blockchain technology
started when Stuart Haber and W. Scott Stornetta described a chain of blocks using a hash function, digital signature, and time stamp for security in 1991; this was the birth of blockchain. However, the greatest growth in blockchain technology was introduced by Satoshi Nakamoto as a secure framework to allow peer-to-peer Bitcoin transactions. In 2014, blockchain 2.0 was introduced, which separated blockchain from bitcoins and allowed applications beyond cryptocurrencies. In this era, Ethereum and other platforms emerged and began implementing blockchain applications. Currently, decentralized file storage and decentralized autonomous group access are two examples of blockchain technology’s application.

E-government is one industry that has benefited from the birth and advancement of blockchain technology. E-government refers to governmental agencies’ use of information technology to improve the delivery of public sector services to citizens and improve the efficiency of government management. The following are the key advantages of e-government.

- Less corruption: Through e-government, government corruption vulnerability is reduced by increasing the monitoring capacity of stakeholders.
- Increased transparency: E-government improves transparency by providing wide monitoring coverage and collaboration with stakeholders.
- Greater convenience: E-government is a commitment to improving the satisfaction of citizens through the efficient delivery of services by governmental agencies. Citizens’ satisfaction includes effective service costs in addition to increased responsiveness when delivering these services.
- Revenue growth: Government revenue increases when fraud and the shadow economy are reduced. The shadow economy includes economic activities that escape detection in official estimates, leading to reduced tax revenue and forcing governments to find other sources of revenue to finance public spending.
- Administrative burden reduction: Administration burdens have costs resulting from government-imposed legislation and regulation on businesses and citizens complying with their obligations.

The main challenges that face the implementation of e-government systems are:

- Lack of general standards to implement e-government systems.
- The challenge of privacy invasion.
- Security threats.

In this paper, the work of administration departments in public and private sector institutions has been considered. The work of these departments focuses on archiving official documents, retrieving archived documents as needed, and the verification of the veracity and existence of documents. These services are vital for governmental work because they represent the bottleneck of the system if there are many requests at the same time. Usually, official documents contain information needed for other work, for example, you may request retrieval and verification of financial documents before using the information in these documents to create a report on the expenditures of the institutions during a period of time. The query related to the existence and veracity of the financial documents must be answered very quickly in order to proceed with writing the required report.

In this work, development of a general framework to improve e-government services by using blockchain technology has been presented. This work aims to digitally transform the work of administration departments. Two typical services offered by most government agencies’ administration departments and used a blockchain system to reformulate them were looked at: 1- Storing official letters in a blockchain system and 2- Verifying the veracity of these documents. Although there are a number of archiving systems, such as Amazon S3 Glacier and Microsoft Exchange, these archiving applications participated the idea of using a third party to coordinate and control the flow of work of the administration and the management of official documents. The existence of a third party is considered a potential bottleneck and is contrary to the principle of transparency.

The main contributions of this work are as follows:

1. The design and implementation of a blockchain-based framework to share and manage official documents in a controlled manner.
2. The archival and the management of official documents without using a third party. This will add transparency to archiving systems.
3. Testing the effectiveness of using blockchain technology to implement an e-government system.

The suggested framework is assessed using two metrics: Firstly, throughput, which is defined as the number of completed transactions in a given amount of time, transactions are either request retrieving documents or verification of existence of a document. Secondly, the variation of the response of
the portal is also tested according to the increment in number of transactions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews related work in the blockchain domain, Section 3 briefly describes the background that were depended on to implement the proposed system, Section 4 introduces the proposed blockchain-based administration department in an e-government context, Section 5 describes our framework and results, and Section 6 is the conclusion and suggestions for future development.

Related Work

Many researchers have investigated the role of blockchain technology to improve aspects of e-government; here, some of these studies were considered. Cai and Zhu \(^\text{10}\) focused on fraud detection and reduction and concluded that blockchain systems are effective for preventing fraud, especially loan application fraud. However, their effectiveness is limited in subjective information fraud where the truth is not easily validated. Hou \(^\text{11}\) discussed the application of blockchain technology in e-government, particularly in a Chinese context. The article found that blockchain technology brings benefits such as improvements in government services and information-sharing across different organizations. However, security, cost, and reliability are still major problems in such applications. Therefore, he concluded that it is crucial to establish a platform to apply blockchain technology in e-government. Liu et al. \(^\text{12}\) discussed the potential risk of privacy disclosure that citizens may face when their data is shared among government departments. They concluded that the use of blockchain to implement e-government services would enhance the security, credibility, and responsiveness of information sharing between departments and protect the privacy of citizens. Naiknavare et al. \(^\text{9}\) suggested a blockchain-based solution to achieve transparency in nongovernmental agencies (NGOs). The aim of the proposed solution is to ensure trust between donors and NGOs. Ghani et al. \(^\text{13}\) introduced a proposed framework for electronic certification sharing using blockchain technology. Graduates, recruiting agencies, and universities around the world may be involved in this system. The system was evaluated for the average response time on a batch of transactions requesting the verification of students’ e-certifications.

All these researchers have studied using blockchain technology by applying one or more features of the blockchain technology for e-government services. In this work, the work and services of the administration department in conventional governmental work have been studied and transformed digitally using blockchain technology, considering all benefits gained from the related work to improve the service of archiving official documents as well as all the services related to this work.

Background

This section presents the background used to implement the proposed administration department system in an e-government context using blockchain technology.

Blockchain Technology Concepts

Internet technology is constantly evolving, and the main direction of its evolution is decentralization. Therefore, blockchain technology is considered as the future internet. Blockchain is described as a distributed system to store information for a decentralized network \(^\text{14}\). Nodes in a blockchain network have a copy of the distributed ledger in addition to the facilities and skills to interpret the data and verify the data within the blockchain. The relation among nodes within a blockchain network is peer-to-peer; they do not rely on a trusted third party. Each node examines a received transaction and decides to either commit that transaction to its copy of the ledger, depending on the consensus scheme, or to reject it. When a block is mined using a consensus scheme, this new block is broadcast to all the nodes within the blockchain network. The nodes will then commit it to their copy of the ledger \(^\text{15}\). Each block consists of two parts: A header and the data. The header consists of various fields, depending on the construction platform and the application itself. Typically, the header has a cryptographic hash of the previous block in the chain, the root hash of the Merkle Tree, the time stamp, the goal of the current difficulty, and the nonce (a four-byte field that usually starts with zero). The data part of the block contains the transactions. The predetermined block and transaction sizes determine the maximum number of transactions within a block \(^\text{16}\).

The Merkle Tree is an intrinsic component of blockchain; it is a hierarchical data structure that enables the secure verification of data collections and is used to organize a large amount of information and to verify this information efficiently and quickly. The Merkle Root is used to accelerate transaction verifications and to check for the existence of a specific transaction in a certain block \(^\text{17} - \text{19}\).

A consensus algorithm is a protocol through which all parties in a distributed computing environment agree on a single data value. It is an essential element in blockchain and is used to guarantee the integrity and security of the data in the distributed ledger. Consensus algorithms are
categorized into two types: Proof-based and vote-based consensus algorithms. In the first type, nodes should prove that they have performed sufficient verifications to obtain the right to do the transaction, thereby adding work to the ledger and getting the rewards. In the second type, messages are exchanged among the nodes in order to agree on the blocks or transactions to be added to the ledger. The blockchain framework is illustrated in Fig. 1.

![Blockchain general framework](image)

**Smart Contracts**

Smart contracts are considered the digital form of traditional contracts. They are usually stored on a blockchain and can self-execute if the entities of the contract have met the predetermined terms and conditions of the contract. In addition, it is a predetermined contract that is provable without the need for a trusted party. Entities depend on the conditions and terms of the smart contract to enter into the agreement determined by the contract. Since the contract terms are transparent to these entities, they ensure the integrity of the contract, and they would be able to check the immutability of the blockchain and no party will alter the conditions and terms of that contract in the future. Blockchain-based applications reap huge benefits from using smart contracts:

1. High throughput and efficient and accurate work due to the immediate execution of the digital contract when the terms are met.
2. High transparency and security because a peer-to-peer protocol to share encrypted transaction records is used. Additionally, each record is connected to the previous and subsequent records on a distributed ledger; therefore, altering the content of a record would alter the entire chain.
3. Saving time and money because there is no need for a third party to handle transactions.

**Blockchain Technology for E-government**

Applying blockchain technology to e-government has many advantages, and e-government leverages the intrinsic features of blockchain technology. Therefore, the advantages of using blockchain technology to develop an e-government framework are as follows:

- Allowing secure storage of government, citizen, and business data.
- Allowing controlled information sharing.
- Reducing management costs for process auditing.
- Reducing potentials of corruption and abuse.
- Eliminating third parties.
- Increasing trust in government and online services.

While blockchain has many specifications that make it promising as an efficient framework for e-government, there are challenges that could exploit blockchain in e-government, such as the following:

- It is an emerging technology.
- It lacks experts and policies.
- It is ambiguous when it comes to scalability and interoperability.
The Work of Administration Departments in Government Institutions

The main task of the administration department in any government institution is to issue and archive official letters, retrieve them upon request, and provide relevant parties with a copy. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the administration department to issue, document, and preserve the official letters in a way that prevents any future changes to and falsification of them. The traditional tasks of the administration department are as follows:

A. The process of issuing official letters according to the following stages:
   a) Typing official letters.
   b) Sending official letters to the director of the governmental institution for signing.
   c) Providing official letters with numbers and dates.
   d) Issuing official letters.
   e) Archiving the letters in the administration department.

B. The process of verifying an official letter happens when a certain party needs a specific letter that was previously issued. This includes the following stages:
   a) Submitting a request to the administration department to obtain a copy of a specific official letter.
   b) Searching for the requested letter by an administrative department employee, depending on the document number and date or on the subject and content of the document.
   c) If the document exists, copying and providing it to the party that requested it.

Here, it is possible of documents being counterfeited and content changed because the sharing process of these documents is not subject to control or tracking after issuing multiple copies. In addition, there is the possibility of losing these documents due to weaknesses in the archiving system. Therefore, using blockchain technology has been suggested to issue, document, and control the sharing of official letters in governmental institutions.

Blockchain-Based System Evaluation Methods

Nowadays, many applications in various fields are implemented on the base of blockchain technology. The performance of these application depends on many factors, such as application criteria, size of the data, types of algorithms used within blockchain, and the type of blockchain. Therefore, it is difficult to determine a uniform measure for the quality of the blockchain-based application.

Most applications use the number of transactions per second to demonstrate the speed of transactions processing within application. Table 1, shows some examples of numbers of transactions per second, and later, in the results section, these values will be compared with the same measurement for the proposed system.

| Application Name   | Number of Transactions per Second (Throughput) |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Bitcoin (BTC)      | 7 TPS                                         |
| Ethereum (ETH)     | 15–25 TPS                                     |
| Litecoin           | 56 TPS                                        |
| Bitcoin Cash (BCH) | 250 TPS                                       |

The Proposed Framework for Blockchain-Based Official Letter Management

In the previous section, the tasks of official letter management in governmental institutions was explained. This section describes the proposed framework to do the same tasks in an e-government environment based on blockchain technology. The name of the proposed system will be abbreviated as FBCOLM. The blockchain-based framework considers two tasks: Issuing official letters and verification of official letters.

1. Issuing official letters: This task represents issuing official letters using blockchain technology. Fig. 2, shows that the framework of this task includes typing the letter by the client, the director of the institution as an endorser, and the employees of the administration department serving as the orderer and the committer. Additionally, the system includes a portal as a frontend for the system that is used to upload the typed letter.

2. Verification of an official letter: The second task in FBCOLM is to verify the validity of an official letter. If clients of the framework have been shared and would later like to verify the validity of the letter, then they must send a verification request for the letter. The portal of the framework receives the request and begins the verification task. If the letter exists in the blockchain, the client will receive a message verifying the validity of the letter; otherwise, the portal returns an invalid message. The verification task uses the hash value of the letter and makes a comparison with the Merkle Tree of the blocks within the ledger. The framework of the verification task is shown in Fig. 3.
Issuing an official letter represents adding a new and trusted official letter to the ledger. Adding this letter requires first applying it as a transaction. Also, the verification task depends mainly on finding a matching hash value for the official letter that requires verification. Both services start with creating a transaction; the transaction of issuing a letter includes the letter itself, while the transaction of verification includes a hash value.

Algorithm 1, creates a list of hash values of all the arrived transactions, and these transactions are added to an array of structure of type issue_transaction.

```plaintext
structure issue_transaction
{ letter: string;
  client_email: string;
  issuing_date: date;
  issuing_time: time;
}
```

Email, issuing_date, and issuing_time are included in the data part of the block when adding to the ledger. Only the letter field is used to create a hash value to help verify the letter as shown in Algorithm 1.
Algorithm 1: Creating a Hash-List

Input: array of issue_transaction, n = no. of issue_transaction
Output: list of hash value of letter

Begin
1: hash_list = empty
2: For count:1 to n
3: hash-value = SHA256(issue_transaction. letter[count])
4: Add (hash_list, hash-value)
5: end for
6: Return (hash_list)
End

The verification task depends mainly on searching the created Merkle Tree to check for the existence of an official letter. The node in the Merkle Tree is a structure of five values.

Merkle Tree node
{ hash_value string of 256 length of digits
date: date
time: time
left. node: pointer to next left node or Null
right. node: pointer to next left node or Null}

The following algorithms present the steps for implementing the Merkle Tree when one letter or a list of letters are added to the framework.

Algorithm 2: Creating the Merkle Tree

Input: hash_list; length=no. of transactions in (hash_list). Merkle_Tree: Merkle Tree node
Output: Updated Merkle-Tree

Begin
1: root= Merkle_Tree
2: For L=0 to length
3: If (root is empty)
4: root =hash_list[0]
5: else
6: While (!(root.left==NULL & root.right==NULL))
7: if (root.left == NULL)
8: root = root.left
9: else
10: root = root.right
11: end if
12: end while
13: if (root.left == NULL)
14: root.left = hash_value[1];
15: break
16: else
17: root=root.right
18: end if
19: end while
20: end if
21: if (root.right == NULL)
22: root = root.left
23: else
24: root=root.right
25: end if
26: end while
27: return (root)
End

Algorithm 3 shows the process of verifying the existence and veracity of a document. The final result is either finding a matching hash that the document is verified or not finding a match.

Algorithm 3: Document Verification

Input: Document, Merkle_Tree
Output: Found as Boolean value

Begin
1: hash_doc = SHA256(Document)
2: found=false
3: While (root != Null && flag == false)
4: If hash_doc == root. hash_value
5: {found = true
6: Break}
7: else
8: root = root.left
9: end if
10: end while
11:While (root != Null && flag == false)
12: If hash_doc == root. hash_value
13: {found = true
14: Break}
15: else
16: root = root.right
17: end if
18: end while
19: return (found)
End

Blockchain Information and Testing Data in FBCOLM

The implementation and testing of blockchain-based applications requires deciding on the types of information fields within the block. In FBCOLM, the block is implemented as a structure that consists of the following fields of information:

- Time stamp: The date and time when the block was added to the ledger.
- Endorser: The endorsement information.
- Data hash value: Hash value of the data (using the SHA-256 hash function algorithm).
- Parent block Hash value: Hash value (head) of the previous block (using the SHA-256 hash function algorithm).
- Block hash value (head of the block): Hash value (head) of the previous block (using the SHA-256 hash function algorithm).
- Data: Text of the form shown in Fig. 4.

The system has been tested using a collection of English language official letters collected from the Internet. The collected letters about 10 letters are of the form shown in Fig. 4. Each of these letters has a size up to 100 KB, which represents the data part of the blocks. These letters are used to test the work of the Merkle tree implementation and the process of a letter verification. Then a code program to generate random text that helps to measure the bandwidth of...
the framework was implemented as shown in Algorithm 4.

![Algorithm 4. Generating random text for testing](image)

**Results and Discussion:**

The practical part of the proposed blockchain administration services has been implemented using TCP Socket programming using Java language to provide official letter archiving and management. The system has been tested using the dataset mentioned in the block information in the FBCOLM section.

The processes for verification and receipt of new documents were tested. In Fig. 5, the simulation program was tested using up to 1,000 client requests for verifications, starting from 50, 100, 200, ..., 1,000 and the time in milliseconds required to process the requests, including one of the official letters in the collected dataset. The time required to complete verifications steadily increases as the number of requested verifications increases because each verification in the blockchain takes time to search for the matched hash value and requires the consent of all blockchain members in order to return the correct feedback to the clients. The time complexity of searching in Merkle tree is O(n), where n is the number of nodes in the tree. Therefore, the time for verification will increase linearly as the size of Merkle tree increases.

According to the results shown in Fig. 5, the throughput of FBCOLM is 25 transactions per second. The comparison of the result of FBCOLM with some popular blockchain-based applications in Table 1 shows that the throughput of FBCOLM is accepted. The comparison result is shown in Fig. 6.

![Figure 5. The average response time of 10 runs for numbers of verification requests ranges from 100 to 1,000 requests in FBCOLM.](image)

![Figure 6. The competition of blockchain-based applications according to number of transactions per second](image)
average range of some famous blockchain-based applications mentioned in Table 1. Furthermore, the portal response time was tested under various densities of requests. The response delay was less than seven seconds when about 1,000 requests arrived simultaneously.

Furthermore, the proposed system was tested when there were multiple nodes participating, each one with a different role and sharing the workload of providing services.

Finally, as a suggestion for future work, adding multiple nodes for each role and testing the blockchain-based e-government services may be considered. Also, increasing the services provided by the system will be implemented as future work on the FBCOLM.

Authors' declaration:
- Conflicts of Interest: None.
- We hereby confirm that all the Figures and Tables in the manuscript are mine ours. Besides, the Figures and images, which are not mine ours, have been given the permission for re-publication attached with the manuscript.
- Ethical Clearance: The project was approved by the local ethical committee in University of Technology.

Authors' contributions statement:
R. F. G.: created the idea of the research and manuscript, planned methodology to reach the conclusion, supervised the article and wrote result analysis and conclusions of the manuscript. A. A. S. Al.: was responsible of simulation, execution of the experiments, logical interpretation and presentation of the results. Sh. M. M.: wrote the theoretical background part of the manuscript and reviewed the article before submission.

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 إطار عمل مقترح لمشاركة الرسائل الرسمية والتحقق منها في بيئة الحكومة الإلكترونية بناءً على تقنية سلسلة الكتل

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الخلاصة:

يساعد التقدم في شبكات الحاسوب وظهور تقنيات جديدة في هذا المجال على اكتشاف بروتوكولات وأطر جديدة توفر خدمات جديدة قائمة على شبكة الحاسوب. تم إنشاء خدمات الحكومة الإلكترونية وهي نسخة جديدة من الحكومة التقليدية، من خلال التطور المطرد للتكنولوجيا بالإضافة إلى حاجة المجتمع المتزايدة للخدمات. ترتبط الخدمات الحكومية ارتباطًا وثيقًا بحياة المواطنين اليومية، لذلك من المهم تطوير هذه الخدمات بما يتناسب مع التطورات التكنولوجية من الضروري الانتقال من الأساليب التقليدية لإدارة العمل الحكومي إلى الأساليب التقنية المتطرفة التي تحسن فعالية الأنظمة الحكومية لتقديم الخدمات للمواطنين. تتم تقنيات سلسلة الكتل من بين التقنيات الحديثة المناسبة للغاية لتطوير خدمات الحكومة الرقمية، وتعد قدرتها التكنولوجية على الحفاظ على الأمان والخصوصية أمرًا حيويًا في أنظمة الحكومة الرقمية.

نظرًا لأنها تعتمد على تحسين إجراءات النزاهة والشفافية مع من المصدر. في هذه الدراسة، تم بناء بروتوكولات لشبكات الحاسوب لتشكيل إطار عمل لشبكة معينة لإدارة الوثائق الرسمية باستخدام تقنية سلسلة الكتل لتوضيح كيف يمكن تطوير أي عناصر من عناصر العمل الحكومي باستخدامها. يضمن إطار المحترض إضافة وثيقة رسمية جديدة، والتحقق من وثيقة موجودة. تم إنشاء النظام باستخدام لغة جافا واختار أوقات الاستجابة لعديد من الطبقات المزمنة. تم اختبار النظام باستخدام المعاملات المزمنة في الثانية. وظهرت النتائج أن النظام المقترح عالج 200 معاملة تحقيق وثيقة في غضون 50 ثانية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، قدم إطار النظام المقترح الوقت المطلوب لاسترجاع المستندات. حوالي ثلاث ثوان لإجابة على 100 معاملة استرجاع وثيقة. علاوة على ذلك، تم مقارنة نتائج المعالمة في الثانية بنتائج نفس القائمة لبعض التطبيقات الشائعة مثل البيتكوين. وكانت نتيجة النظام المقترح ضمن القيمة المتوسطة لفس القياس للتطبيقات الأخرى التي تم مقارنتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تقنية سلسلة الكتل، شبكات الحاسوب، الانظمة الموزعة، الحكومة الإلكترونية، شبكات نظير لنظير.