Key Factors and Implications for E-Government Diffusion in Developed Economies

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INTRODUCTION

E-government has grown in significance with the growth of the digital age and the global economy; however, at a slower pace. Its impact is pervasive and is evident in the availability and distribution of products and services within agencies, to business, and to citizens in western countries. There are many aspects of e-government; researchers have written extensively on the subject and have reached conclusions that will continue to evolve as new discoveries are made.

The business community, and society at-large, have been challenged by the complexities of e-government in meeting the needs in developing countries as well. The relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries is interdependent due to natural resources that may be available in underdeveloped countries and products that may be modified in their packaging and price for sale to the people in underdeveloped countries (e.g., toothpaste packaged in small, disposable packets, or shampoo in small vials, or second/third generation mobile phones to keep it affordable for the people in the underdeveloped countries). The polarization between e-government and society is due to conflicting financial, geopolitical/ethical and societal goals (Webber, 2006); this issue is evident in the adoption rates and usage of government Web sites. Although progress has been made in identifying e-government opportunities, the juxtaposition of government infrastructure, technology, and societal needs often conflict and, as a result, have adversely impacted the products and services offered by e-governments throughout the western world and ultimately, the adoption rates.

BACKGROUND

A recent visit to some state and local government Web sites, including New York City (http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/) and North Carolina (http://www.ncgov.com/), revealed that some local and state government Web sites in the United States offer static information. Unfortunately, governments have failed to take advantage of the full functionality of the Internet; moreover, they have ignored the upsurge in Internet usage in the commercial sector. Webber (2006) notes that while Canada outpaces the United States in nearly all Internet activities, both countries fail to capitalize on its potential to increase citizen interaction and to reduce costs associated with providing goods, services and information (Webber, 2006, 1). Most sites are based on a brochure-ware format; citizens can download forms, complete them and return the information by traditional postal mail; Webber notes that form downloading is one of the most common activities on US and Canadian sites. Further, he notes the growth and adoption of e-government may be hampered by an antiquated form-based approach to requesting and providing services (Webber, 2006, 1).

E-GOVERNMENT USAGE

An examination of e-government adoption must begin with an examination of Web site usage and an identification or profile of the typical Internet user. Figure 1 compares the profiles of the typical Australian, Canadian, and US online citizens. For those who do go online, many do not take advantage of general portal information.

Australian E-Government User Profile

In March 2006, the results of a recent government prospectus on Australia's e-government, which was, for the first time, endorsed by the prime minister and cabinet were announced,. The prospectus highlighted the government's flawed approach of layering Internet functionality over antiquated policies as opposed to first determining who is using the Internet, that is, user profile, and the purposes for which they use it. Today, only one in three online consumers uses the Internet to access government services. The profile of the typical online Australian government Web site users mirrors that of its American and Canadian counterparts (i.e., government Web site users) in many ways, however, there are some noteworthy differences; these differences are summarized as follows.

- The typical Australian user is a baby boomer in her mid-40s; it should be noted that females dominate online government site use in Australia with 62%. This contrasts with the US and Canada, where usage

Figure 1. Comparison of Australian, US, and Canadian Online Citizen Profiles (Webber, 2006, p. 3)

	Australia	US	Canada
Age	44	46	43
Average household income	A$50,303	US$65,942	C$53,096
Female	62%	52%	51%
Married or living with a partner	57%	70%	69%
Has a college degree	35%	37%	28%
Has broadband at home	40%	42%	57%
Technology optimist	46%	58%	56%
Owns one or two computers	69%	77%	81%
Uses the Internet more than 3 hours per week	79%	70%	61%
Goes online daily	69%	62%	56%

Base: Australian and North American online consumers

Source: Forrester's Consumer Technographics Q1® 2005 North American Retail, Automotive, A
Online Study and Forrester's APCTAS Q1 2006 Survey

is equally spread between men and women. Fifty seven percent are married, however, 68% have no children. The average income of the e-government Web site user is 8% higher than their nonuser counterparts (Webber, 2006, p. 3).

- Online activities vary by federal, state, and local Web sites. Activities on a federal Web site include downloading or printing out a government form, filling in tax details or completing tax returns online; accessing information regarding benefit eligibility; accessing employment information; accessing tourism information, and applying online for benefits (Webber, 2006, p. 4). Activities on a state Web site include downloading or printing out government forms, accessing tourism information, license renewal or vehicle registration, accessing employment information and accessing motor vehicle related information (Webber, 2006, p. 5). On the local level, activities include accessing tourism information, accessing employment information, accessing real-estate information, downloading or printing out a government form, and ordering consumer publications (Webber, 2006, p. 5).

Canadian E-Government User Profile

Taken as a whole, Canadians prefer to use other channels to communicate with the government; these include the phone channel, mail, or in-person contact (Cardin, 2006, p. 1). The driver for this behavior is based on the type of inquiry, which, in turn, determines the type of interaction with the government (Cardin, 2006, p. 3). Citizens use the Internet to perform general research, for example, government statistics, laws and regulations, and possible employment opportunities within the government; in contrast, they prefer phones for personal research, including eligibility for health and government services, checking the status of tax returns, or applying for health benefits (Cardin, 2006, p. 2). In-person contact is the channel of choice for passport transactions, social security numbers, and government benefits; mail remains the channel of choice for filing taxes (Cardin, 2006, p. 3).

United States E-Government User Profile

While more than 38 million US citizens applied for Medicare benefits, only 5% applied online. This gap is evident in the security arena as well; although there has been a marked increase in attention to security and safety since 9/11, less than 10% of North American citizens visited government Web sites for information on security, health or safety issues, including the Avian flu, terrorism, or natural disasters (Webber, 2006). The most prolific e-government users are baby boomers; Young boomers range from age 41–50 and older boomers range from age 51-61. The most popular activity is downloading forms and research. Seventeen percent visit state government sites while 15% and 14% visit federal and local sites, respectively (Webber, Holmes, & Hanson, 2006, p. 1). One common thread among US e-government users is they are technology enthusiasts. Not surprisingly, Gen X and Gen Y are the most optimistic about technology, however, older boomers outpace younger boomers (65% to 61%); seniors are the most reticent at 58% (Webber et al., 2006, p. 3).