

Chapter XXXIX

E-Government and Local Service Delivery: The Case of Italian Local Governments

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to assess the current status and level of technology in providing on line services among larger Italian Municipalities (MUs) by presenting the results of a survey conducted by the researcher among all MUs with a population in excess of 40,000 inhabitants. Furthermore, the analysis also aims to assess the perceptions of Chief Information Officers (CIOs) with regard to the impact of e-government on the provision of services. The survey results show that MUs are generally using Internet to support interaction with different constituents and with different levels of technology. MUs have been developing all 4 stages of online service provision but higher levels of sophistication (transaction and integration) are primarily associated with the following types of LG interaction: government-to-employees and government-to-government. CIOs argue that little achievement has been obtained so far in terms of efficiency while ICT usage is facilitating access to better quality information. Lessons learnt and policy implications are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Governments around the world have been seen as inefficient, ineffective and unresponsive for several decades. In response to this cynical view and the increasing demands by constituents to deliver “better” services in terms of quality, accessibility and choice (Osborne D. & Gaebler T.,

1993), they have been implementing a series of reforms. The principles inspiring them aim to improve the government’s responsiveness and efficiency while reducing the cost of public service operations. E-government, namely the use in the public sector of information and communication technology (ICT) for the delivery of information and services, may facilitate the pursuit of these

objectives by increasing accessibility to information and services and reducing time (i.e. the availability of web-services around the clock) and space (i.e. access to the public agency from anywhere in the world) restraints. Digital delivery systems could also save the government money. They hold potential as effective and efficient managerial tools that are able to collect, store and manage large volumes of data and information, which can be transferred and shared on the government's web site on a real-time basis using upload and download functions. In the long run, they could also contribute to a shift in confidence in the government. If citizens become more confident about the accessibility and performance of the government, they may be more prone to re-engage with the public sector.

This chapter assumes that governments have been adopting ICT and establishing an on line presence for the introduction of new ways of providing information and public services and thereby meeting expectations for the above-mentioned expected effects. There is evidence, particularly in the United States (Moon M. J., 2002; Norris D. F. & Moon M. J., 2005; Reddick F. C. & Frank H. A., 2007; West D. M., 2004), relating to the current use of technologies, the web in particular, to provide information and services. Data shows that there is a high diffusion of government web sites, however their transactional capability, that is to say the possibility for citizens and other constituents to actually access on line services (i.e. to request a certificate, pay taxes or monitor an application for services) is still limited to less than one-third of local governments (Norris D. F. & Moon M. J., 2005). In Europe, systematic research providing an overview of the diffusion of ICT and web information and services at local level is scant or focuses on case studies (Walker R. M., 2006).

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the current status of ICT adoption and web-service delivery, both in terms of the levels of technology and the interaction with different stakeholders (citizens,

businesses, governments and employees) in the context of larger Italian municipalities whose population is in excess of 40,000 inhabitants. Based on U.S. literature, the expectation was to find widescale diffusion of actual equipment (workstations) and network technologies as well as institutional web sites primarily for providing information rather than two-way transactional services. Evidence confirms the readiness of municipalities in terms of basic technologies. However, in terms of the on line provision of services, the data offers some counterintuitive results: the web sites do not just provide information, 86% of them also offer transactional services. A closer look at this data shows great variation in terms of the availability of transactional services at the integration level for different stakeholders. Employees (45.4%) can access on line services more frequently than citizens and businesses (respectively 11%; 34%).

This chapter does not only contribute to advances in the knowledge of e-government usage, it also aims to discuss the perceived organizational impacts of ICT usage by presenting the results of a survey conducted by the researcher in 2005-2006.

The chapter is divided into six sections. Section 2 briefly examines relevant literature. Section 3 describes the context of Italian municipalities and their efforts with regard to e-government. Section 4 discusses the purpose and methods of the study. Section 5 provides an overview of the degree of ICT adoption within the context of larger Italian municipalities and the perception among CIOs with regard to the effect of e-government on the provision of services on line. Section 6 draws some conclusions and policy implications.

BACKGROUND

ICT has been implemented by governments to different degrees and refers to the organizational strategies, policies and processes employed by the

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