



Chapter XI

E-Government: Trick or Treat?

Alison Hopkins, National Consumer Council, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter approaches the topic from a consumer perspective, looking at some of the principal challenges for governments in developing not just e-government, but responsive e-government.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Consumer, in the context of this paper, is a broad term overlapping with citizen, and includes individual users or potential users of government services. Public services need to respond to the diversity of consumer demand, so it is more meaningful to think about the plurality of individuals as consumers, service users, stakeholders, and individuals concerned with the wider public interest, rather than using differentiated identities for the roles people have in their daily business (NCC, 2004).

E-government is not a new concept. In the UK for example, the government issued a consultation paper called *Government.direct* in 1996. E-delivery has become a key plank of government policy — for local as much as central government — and is essentially a top-down development aiming for efficiency, speed and convenience, with meeting consumer need as one goal. On the whole e-government services are passive — consumers can find information and download forms, but there is limited interactivity. E-government has the capacity to make services much more user-led, and to be much more responsive, but has a long way to go to realize its potential (OECD, 2003).

Responsive e-government is about the quality of interaction between public administrations and their clients, including how far the needs of clients can be satisfied within policy frameworks, the comprehensibility and accessibility of administration, the openness of administration to client participation in decision making, and the availability of redress. It is also about a different way of thinking and organizing services which will require an overhaul of systems and professions.

Responsive government will need to take the e-government agenda several steps further than merely providing online services. Crucially, if governments are to be responsive they will need to engage consumers or clients at each and every stage of policy development and determination. The OECD project on e-government started from the point that e-government has the potential to be a major enabler in the adoption of good governance practices, and that developing responsive administration is integral to its achievement (OECD, 2001). The challenge is how to engage effectively and appropriately with consumers in an ongoing two-way process.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSUMERS

Generally speaking, consumers have limited interest in and experience of government services — particularly central government services. Most consumers interact with central government on an infrequent basis, and only when it is mandatory, for example to pay taxes, apply for a passport, register a birth, marriage or death, or apply for a driving licence — or for essential services such as health and social welfare. Contact with administration at a local level is much more frequent. In the UK, it is estimated that local authorities handle 80% of government-to-citizen transactions (Socitm, 2003).

Services that are delivered or experienced locally like refuse collection, street lighting and policing are much more likely to register in the mind of the public than the more remote and rarely experienced services of central government. E-government programs, therefore, will need to overcome public disinterest if they are to attract widespread support and public engagement.

Gaps in Trust and Confidence

There is broad agreement that the current lack of user trust and confidence, especially among specific sectors of the population, is a significant inhibitor to the widespread growth in use of electronic services in many OECD countries. The end of the “dot-com” boom, coupled with the high profile given to failures and security breaches, continues to exacerbate existing consumer concerns.

Many consumers will need to be persuaded of the benefits of dealing with government electronically. In part this stems from the general reluctance to venture online but governments are also going through what might be called a crisis of credibility in their relations with citizens and consumers. There are questions about governments’ ability to deliver what consumers want or expect, or to be responsive to their needs. Also in many countries the experience and history of government IT projects is not a happy one with projects being well over budget or failing to deliver. In addition the steady erosion of trust and confidence in institutions — public and commercial — and low voter turnout in elections is seen as evidence of a more general apathy. This trend is widespread

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