E-Value Creation in a Government Web Portal in South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

By the end of 2005, an emerging era of e-government had arrived in South Africa with the promise to transform public service delivery and the relationships between government, business and the citizens. E-government has been perceived as the second revolution in public management after the new public management of the 1980s (Saxena, 2005; Teicher, Hughes, & Dow, 2002). The advent of e-government information and services globally has brought increasing focus on the need to develop user-oriented quality Web portal services. Prior to this time, governments paid little attention to citizen service quality issues (Teicher et al., 2002).

The emergence of ICT-enabled capacity for service delivery has increasingly forced governments to adopt a customer-oriented focus in the provision of public services. Service quality issues have traditionally dominated Web site development in the business arena simply because of the huge potential to affect the size of the customer base. Prominent among these has been the emergence of e-banking and e-travel Web portals (Bauer, Hammerschmidt, & Falk., 2005). As governments acquire growing customer base with e-service delivery, the associated development and maintenance 'sunk costs' has forced them to look at the means to transform service delivery to gain increased benefits. They are finding that government Web portals can support new opportunities to transform traditional government service delivery for societal benefits.

This article focuses on e-value creation for government Web portals. It uses South Africa's Cape Gateway Portal as a case study for promoting e-value in public service delivery to "customer citizens." In this article, e-service quality and e-value are used interchangeably. The article starts with a background on government Web portals and it establishes a conceptual definition of Web portal e-value. It then provides a framework for assessing e-value creation for a government

portal. Based on the literature and South Africa's experiences, it identifies and describes the prime movers for e-value creation in a government Web portal.

BACKGROUND

Government Web Portals in the Western Cape Province

Government Web portals are seen to offer a number of opportunities to citizens that impact upon options for enhancing service delivery by governments. These include: (1) around-the-clock information and services provision, (2) remote access to key Web sites (Layne & Lee, 2001), (3) enhancing citizen participation in the democratic process (Ashlin et al., 2004) and (4) provision of a platform to rethink the 'e-value creation' process (Buckley, 2003). For shared-knowledge societies, e-government is expected to add value through faster service delivery and increased citizen participation in government affairs and democratic processes (Wimmer, 2002). Despite the global diffusion of e-government, most nations still face a number of barriers in terms of getting the widely acclaimed benefits (Gilbert & Balestrini, 2004; Saxena, 2005). Therefore, more scholarly investigations into the potential of government Web portals to enhance the quality of e-service delivery and its capacity to increase societal engagement in the processes of governance are needed.

The Provincial Government of the Western Cape (PGWC) in South Africa has adopted a goal of taking its citizens into the "information age" by implementing policies in support of e-government service delivery. This is in direct response to the fears that the era of the shared-knowledge societies could by-pass sub-Saharan Africa, just like the eras of the industrial

society and information society (Ondari-Okemwa, 2004). It is interesting to note that in South Africa's total household telephony penetration up to 2004 stood at 47% (Gilward & Esslaar, 2004), and is projected to rise on the back of mobile access making e-government deployment timely and relevant in a rapidly changing environment (i.e., shared-knowledge societies). The Internet is changing the way communities live and work, including interaction with and participation in the government policy process and programs.

Three years after its inception in 2002, the Cape Gateway Portal demonstrated national leadership in South Africa for an integrated approach towards making e-government services more accessible. As the challenges to connect with citizens, including those in the most remote areas, were faced it became evident that the portal had a central role in the government's policy development processes. The emergence of shared-knowledge societies in this environment is changing both citizens and business perceptions about public service delivery. Hence, like many countries, South Africa stands at the cross-roads of a major public sector transformation. The PGWC is using the portal as a key strategic tool of its e-government revolution.

The Cape Gateway Portal

Realizing the need to provide a one-stop online government for citizens and to improve e-government information service delivery, the Center for e-Innovation in the PGWC decided to establish the Cape Gateway Portal in 2002.

The portal was originally designed to achieve four major objectives: (1) provide support for the ICT infrastructure for e-government, (2) enhance government efficiency and transparency, (3) deliver better services to businesses and citizens, and (4) to overcome the digital divide by building shared-knowledge societies in the Western Cape Province. The portal structured its e-services around concepts of important individual life-episodes and business needs.

Portals are more than conventional Web sites; they are extensive Web sites designed to provide one-stop online service offerings. Unlike conventional Web sites, Web portals integrate the 4C Internet business models of *content*, *context*, *communication*, and *commerce*. Examples of prominent full service Web portals include Yahoo (which started as the search engine) and America Online (AOL), (Zahir, Dobing, & Hunter, 2002). A number of definitions have been used to describe Web portals. Bauer et al., (2005) describe portals as innovative self-service technologies (SSTs) with a single access point, unlimited content and excellent retrieval capabilities. Others describe them as gateways to Internet Web sites that provide key information and services including access to selected sites through direct links and search engines (Zahir et al., 2002). Web portals can also be viewed as platforms to acquaint citizens with an organization,

to explore its goods and services, and make enquiries (Yang, Shaohan, Zhou, & Zhou, 2005).

With rising citizen expectations, the government portal should deliver superior service quality and create long term e-customer loyalty. The development of user friendly Web portals requires paying close attention to the growing citizen demands for quality information and service. But failure to harness public perceptions of quality and integrate these in Web portal development could perpetuate the digital divide. The overarching goal of the Cape Gateway Portal is to provide an all encompassing portal that offers government services and information in a socially inclusive way; one that puts the citizen at the centre of its drive to create shared-knowledge societies. The fundamental question then is: What is the PGWC doing to deliver long term e-service quality to its citizens? Understanding how e-government is migrating towards becoming citizen-centric is critical. Equally important is the need to identify e-value drivers that can build the reputation and image of portals and bring the majority of citizens on-line. Finding that elusive balance between granularity[1] and the reality of providing for ongoing maintenance in order to engage a broad spectrum of diverse citizens of the "rainbow nation" is a high level measure of success in this e-value creation process, and it provides significant challenge for government Web portals.

Particularly in the South African context with 11 official languages, a dual economy[2], wide educational and cultural differences, additional challenges to provide access to relevant content across the diverse citizenry arises. In the Western Cape Province, the more affluent people reside largely in urban areas and the ultra-poor are located in the former homelands, informal settlements around urban areas and the rural areas. Reaching citizens with relevant information to address major life needs in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas either directly through ICT or amplified through established second-order social networks at minimum cost is a key issue for government. Providing relevant information in ways that fit the broad socio-economic and cultural diversity requires integration of indigenous knowledge that traditionally resides in human stories which have not often been previously documented. This intersection of race, income inequality, diverse location and the requirement for specific cultural content, highlights the enormous challenges and responsibilities facing the successful development of a government portal in this situation.

The development of the Cape Gateway portal needed to critically examine how it could consistently deliver e-value in a continually transforming economy. As national economy progresses (i.e., traditional market-led economy coupled with an informal economy), the growth of e-commerce and Internet usage will expand and influence every aspect of government, businesses, communities, and individual lifestyle alike. Mapping out a process to provide timely,

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