

Chapter 24

E-Inclusion Strategies in Public Administrations: Experiences From Regional Governments in Spain

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of e-Government could reduce administrative costs and the time devoted to repetitive tasks by civil servants, offering greater transparency to public administration, improving the current performance of public sector services, and expanding access to services. However, previous research indicates that there are significant barriers for citizens, assuming major obstacles. In this sense, the EU and, in particular, the Spanish government has formulated policies and legal frameworks to introduce in the field of the provision of public sector services in order to customize and to access these services. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to obtain a vision of government strategies adopted by Spanish regional governments to reduce the digital divide.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of new Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in public administrations, which has been called e-government, has become one of today's most important issues on political agendas, and is a concept that is apparently in constant development (Jaeger, 2003). In fact, the implementation of e-government has been promoted by many international bodies (see, for example, G-7, 1997; OECD, 1998), as it is generally known that the implementation of ICT in public administrations

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could reduce both administrative costs and the time devoted to repetitive tasks by civil servants (Evans & Yen, 2005), offering greater transparency to public administration (Ya & Tat-Kei Ho, 2005; Wong & Welch, 2004), improving the current performance of public sector services (Hartley, 2005) and expanding access to services due to its availability twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week on the Internet (Scott, 2006; West, 2004). Nonetheless, the efforts of public administrations to achieve their performance objectives in public sector services and online government information are still irregular (Paris, 2005).

Furthermore, although some authors have claimed that the provision of ICT services and the Internet in particular to excluded communities may help alleviate social exclusion (Selwyn, 2002; Van Winden, 2001), and there is a presumption that Internet use by socially excluded groups is beneficial (Foley, 2004), over the years it has also become clear that the information era in itself has generated and reinforced new forms of inequality and exclusion (Chigona & Mbhele, 2008), which has also been referred to as the 'digital divide' (Zeitlyn et al., 1998).

Indeed, prior research indicates that significant barriers such as access, service design, personal capacity, trust, skills, willingness, and awareness can create obstacles for the very people who could benefit most from public sector services on the Web (European Commission, 2004; Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Hsieh et al., 2011; Sipior et al., 2011). It has driven that digital divide and e-Inclusion be discussed widely in the information society agenda for nearly a decade since the emergence of e-services in the public sector (Bélanger & Carter, 2009).

In this regard, the European Union and, particularly, the Spanish public administration are formulating public policies and legal frameworks to introduce IT in the field of public sector service delivery, in order to personalize and to improve the quality of public sector services and access to these services (European Commission, 1999; Xunta de Galicia, 2011). Thus, in the framework of the European Union, many initiatives have been taken to regulate and coordinate the actions of the Member states to facilitate digital convergence and meet the challenges of the Information Society (European Commission, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2010). The concept of e-Inclusion is a basic concept of successive Action Plans of the Information Society of the European Union, up to the current i2010 strategy, one of whose main pillars is "promoting an Inclusive Information Society" - in the belief that the lack of access to ICT or inability to use them increasingly constitutes a severe form of social and economic exclusion (European Commission, 2005).

In fact, over the last years, some reports carried out by the European Commission have highlighted the move from "digital divide" to "e-Inclusion" (Helbig et al., 2009; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Selwyn & Facer, 2007; Warschauer, 2004). It is based on the belief that "digital divide" is essentially centered on the question of access, neglecting the advantage of other equally important factors (Weerakkody et al., 2012). The lesson of "knowledge gap" research for students of the Internet is that "access" is never enough to ensure productive use (Codagnone, 2009). Therefore, beyond access to ICT tools and services, e-Inclusion focuses on the empowerment and participation of people in the knowledge society and the degree to which ICT contributes to equalizing and promoting participation in society, which has concentrated the debate about e-Inclusion on three core concepts, namely digital divide, social exclusion or social inequalities, and social cohesion (Weerakkody et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, although some indexes to measure digital inclusion have been defined in Europe (Betvegna & Guerrieri, 2010), e-Inclusion is multidimensional and the lack of conceptual definitions and theoretical frameworks for e-Inclusion has prevented the development of reliable measurement and identification of specific factors that influence e-Inclusion (Weerakkody et al., 2012). In this regard, policy makers should take into account factors of a political dimension –e.g. legislation, economic dimensions,

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