

Chapter XVI

E-Government for Current and Future Senior Citizens

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ABSTRACT

To meet the current and future senior citizens' demand for e-government, local governments will need to have a better understanding of their needs. This study is one of the first empirical investigations to improve our understanding in this area. It draws from e-government and gerontology literatures to develop a list of factors affecting the demand for e-government among current and future seniors. This study examines all such factors in the context of a local government in the United States. The results confirm the existence of a strong and significant future demand for e-government services among future senior citizens—baby boomers. Interestingly, mobility and preference for human contact do not register as significant factors determining use of e-government. This chapter also provides specific policy recommendations for meeting senior citizens' e-government needs.

INTRODUCTION

Demographic shifts in the coming ten years will create both challenges and opportunities for electronic government at the local level in the United States. In the coming five years, we will see the beginning waves of baby boomers turning into senior citizens (age 65 or older). Baby boomers, the

generation born between 1946 and 1964, constitute a quarter of the population in the United States.¹ For local government, the primary challenge is to serve an increasingly internet-savvy group of senior citizens. Even after retirement, baby boomers are likely to still be active online if they use the internet near current levels. A 2007 survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life

Project puts the percentage of internet user for the 50-64 age group (baby boomers) at 65 percent, this is just a few percentage points lower than the percentage of adult internet users (71 percent).² Moreover, given improvements in health, these future senior citizens are expected to have more time to engage with government through volunteering in neighborhood associations and local non-profit agencies, or serving on local government commissions after retirement.

The opportunity presented in such a situation means that local governments must be proactive in meeting the future e-government demands of boomers. Any further delay in planning and taking concrete actions will likely result in forfeiting such an opportunity. Local governments can incorporate into their long-term planning various ways in which they can meet such demands. Moreover, the growth and change in internet and wireless technologies will make it easier for government to provide services online and for citizens to receive them. For example, there are digital community initiatives that seek to provide free internet access in public areas such as city parks, city halls, and downtown business districts. The increasing prevalence of “smart phones” with web features can allow better delivery of government and information service to senior citizens who may prefer the convenience of using a phone.

To seize the opportunity requires a careful examination of the potential demand of aging boomers for electronic government. The research described in existing literature on electronic government with a focus on local government provides a limited picture of such demand. Much of existing research examines the progress of local government only within the scope of the use of information technology for information and service delivery. For example, a comprehensive survey of U.S. local electronic government efforts suggests that local governments are making progress in adopting information technology but more are desired (D. Norris & Moon, 2005). One

exception is the study of senior citizen use of a particular e-government service in Singapore (Phang et al., 2005). This study examines a variety of factors, drawing from the fields of information system and gerontology.

Regarding the broader issue of online behavior, senior citizens are the least-studied among the age groups (Eastman & Iyer, 2005). Commercial Web sites concentrate on the mid-age and high income groups as they constitute a major revenue source. Our review of e-government literature as well as senior citizen online behavior suggests that little is known about senior citizen online behavior and even less about what online services they would need from local government.

The main objective of this chapter is to understand and meet the needs of future senior citizens for local electronic government. This study makes several unique contributions. First, it targets a segment of the population that can significantly increase the demand for e-government in the next decade. Second, it integrates the existing knowledge in gerontology, citizen engagement, and e-government for an enhanced understanding of the future demand of e-government. Lastly, it offers one of the first empirical investigations focusing on baby boomers and senior citizens at the local level.³

This chapter is organized as follows: The next section will place this study in the broader context of e-government literature. It will articulate the need for understanding senior citizen demand for e-government, then review relevant literature and present the context of the research. In the subsequent section, the main section of the chapter, a discussion of survey results will be provided. The survey results will empirically test the assertions made in the literature review. They will also offer specific policy and management recommendations for meeting the future e-government needs of baby boomers. The last section concludes this study with suggestions for future research.

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