

The Role of *Choice* in the Development of an M-Government Strategy in Turkey

Ronan de Kervenoael, Sabanci University, Turkey and Aston University, UK

N. Meltem Cakici, Gediz University, Turkey

Duygu Guner, Bahcesehir University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Enhanced data services through mobile phones are expected to be soon fully transactional, interactive and embedded with other mobile consumption practices. While private services will continue to take the lead in the mobile data revolution, others such as government and NGOs are becoming more prominent m-players. This paper adopts a qualitative case study approach interpreting micro-level municipality officers' mobility concept, ICT histories and choice practices for m-government services in Turkey. The findings highlight that in-situ ICT choice strategies are non-homogenous, sometimes conflicting with each other; and that current strategies have not yet justified the necessity for municipality officers to engage and fully commit to m-government efforts. Furthermore, beyond m-government initiatives' success or failure, the mechanisms related to public administration mobile technical capacity building and knowledge transfer are identified to be directly related to m-government engagement likelihood.

Keywords: Choice, M-Government, Mobility, Technology Capability Building, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

The issue of Information Communication Technology (ICT thereafter) choice has become increasingly prominent in debates regarding the future role and shape of governments¹ (Kushchu, 2007; Kushchu & Kuscu, 2003; Avgerou, 2000; Garson, 2006a; Jorgensen &

Klay, 2007; West, 2007). This has contributed to an improved understanding of public administration organizations' many aspects such as: digital strategies (Kahraman et al., 2007; Ferguson, 2001), impact of e-culture on e-governments (Hazlett & Hill, 2003), m-government policy issues (Yildiz, 2007; Lam, 2005), service architecture (Sharma & Gupta, 2004; Abramowicz et al., 2006), e-governance

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(Saxena, 2005; Stahl, 2005; Holliday & Kwok, 2004) and e-government models (Heeks, 2002).

Amid this nascent research agenda, in this paper we identify three on-going gaps in the literature. Firstly, the understanding of mobility *within* public administration in emerging markets is limited. Secondly, most research tends to remain at macro-country level rather than investigating m-choices faced every day by individual civil servants. Thirdly, despite some exception (Ghyasi & Kushchu, 2004; Kushchu & Kuscu, 2003) there has been a lack of consideration regarding the impact of m-technologies on public administration's ICT capability building and knowledge transfer potential.

In this context, it is estimated that governments during the period 2000-2010 will spend as much as \$3 trillion on ICT (Gubbins, 2004). However, it is important to bear in mind that between 60% and 85% of e-government projects do fail (Gubbins, 2004). A particular concern has been the somehow limited access to digital infrastructure, i.e. PC and wired internet access by the masses in emerging markets. In 2008, for example, the UN e-government readiness report places Turkey at the 76th place out of 182 countries. An additional concern, in our context, is directly related to capability absorption issues both by public administration and for low-income, less educated citizens, which in effect restrict further ICT choices (Evcil et al., 2004; Torenli, 2006). Turkey is a clear case for such trends (Dedeoglu, 2004; Mao et al., 2005; Ozcan & Kocak, 2003).

This paper draws on a number of intellectual traditions, including retail choice, ICT adoption models (e.g., TAM), organizational development, innovation studies, development studies, social network theory and evolutionary theory of the firm (Marcelle, 2004). The specific aims are: (i) to ascertain the link from the perceptions of e-government ICT to realizable m-government; (ii) to explore the impact of *choice* in shaping engagement likelihood with m-government activities in practice, at civil servant level, and (iii) to empirically test the

theoretical premise through a series of email and phone interviews.

This paper provides a unique qualitative analysis by drawing on a series of interviews with municipality officers and considers how macro-opportunities and micro-choices are shaping the nascent provision of m-government services in Turkey. In doing so, the paper seeks to deepen the understanding of mobility and choice for public administration in emerging markets.

The following section introduces and refines the concept of mobility in public administration and the construct of choice. In the third section, the move from e to m-government in Turkey is explored. Next, methodology and data collection are presented. This is followed by the results from the exploratory sample of 19 municipality officers over 4 waves of email questioning. Lastly, concluding remarks and future research directions are provided.

MOBILITY AND CHOICE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Unpacking Mobility

Traditionally mobility in public administration has been understood under four main headings moving from voice to data services: (i) A traditional perspective is centred around the debate of citizen inclusion and exclusion in public life (Foley, 2004). The main issues revolve around the creation of an able society, where citizens and public administration are actively involved and truly interacting together (Moon, 2002). Recurring sub-themes of these studies are linked to governance debate (Heeks, 2001), voice of the civil society (Klein, 1999), transparency (Larsen & Rainie, 2002; McIvor et al., 2002), and democracy arguments (Musso et al., 2000). Lately, this debate has broadened with the emergence of convenient ICT infrastructure (e.g., 3G) allowing the enactments of what were mainly macro strategies (Melitski et al., 2005; Holden et al., 2003). ICT has provided day to day convenient mechanisms to

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