Chapter 53
Comparing Citizens' use of E-Government to Alternative Service Channels

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the role e-government has over citizens' when they initiate contact with their government. It also compares the influence that other contact channels have on citizens' contacts with government. A public opinion survey is analyzed to determine what factors explain the different methods of contacting government, namely through the phone, e-government, visiting a government office, or a combination of approaches. This chapter also analyzes citizens' preferred method of contacting government, examining different types of information or assistance that citizens' can get from government. The results of this study indicate that e-government is just one of many possible service channels that citizens use, with the phone being the most common. The overall importance of the survey results indicate that e-government is just one contact channel for citizens, and resources should also be devoted towards other contact channels given their importance as well to citizens.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Citizen engagement is thought to be the key to the success of e-government and its development. E-government can only achieve true transformation through citizen engagement (Jones, Hackney, & Irani, 2007). Research indicates that citizens who use the Internet to contact government express higher levels of satisfaction with their contact experience (Cohen, 2006). A satisfactory contact experience by citizens improves their feelings of trust and support for government and its leaders thereby enhancing democracy (Cohen, 2006).

There is a growing body of literature that examines channel choice and e-government use (Reddick, 2005a; Pieterson, 2009). Research

is starting to focus on non Internet forms of e-government such as CRM or customer relationship management systems (Schellong, 2008). There is a growing body of research that examines citizen-initiated contacts with government, and the approaches that governments use to handle these contacts (Reddick, 2005a; Ong & Wang, 2009).

Compared to the Internet, telephones in many developed and developing countries are a more popular means of accessing information from government. In addition, research shows that a combination of contact channels works best to increase e-government service adoption (Singh & Sahu, 2008). Citizens prefer to use a combination of contact channels; therefore, government should address this by providing multiple contact points (Chen, Huang, & Hsiao, 2006; Ebbers, Pieterson, & Noordman, 2008). This chapter presents an analysis of the most popular contact channels currently used and preferred by citizens to get information and assistance from their government.

On the supply side of e-government, there is a fairly extensive literature that indentifies the importance of e-government to public sector organizations (Coursey & Norris, 2008). However, on the demand side we know less about how and why citizens initiate contact with their government via the Internet (Thomas & Streib, 2003; Thomas & Streib, 2005; Reddick, 2005b). The purpose of this chapter is to examine citizens and their contacts with e-government through different service channels, a relatively understudied area of research.

The next section of this chapter examines the existing literature on citizens' contacts with government through e-government and factors that are predicted to explain their choice of contact channel. This section is followed by a presentation of a survey that examines what citizens look for when they go online, the service channels they use to initiate contact with government, and the preferred method of gathering government information. Towards the end of this chapter, there is a statistical analysis examining factors that

explain actual and preferred contact methods. The conclusion section summarizes the most important findings of this research and provides future research opportunities.

LITERATURE ON E-GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS

The e-government literature that examines citizens and their contact with government can be grouped into two important themes: issues and constraints and socio-economic and demographic factors. These two themes should have an impact on citizen adoption of e-government compared to other contact channels such as the phone. This section examines the literature on each of these themes with reference to its impact on citizens' use of e-government to initiate contacts with their government.

ISSUES AND CONSTRAINTS

There are several issues and constraints mentioned in the e-government literature that should affect the choice of contact channel citizens' choose to use. One measure is the level of satisfaction that the individual has with the ways things are going in their community (Cohen, 2006). User satisfaction is critical for the development of e-government (Verdegem & Verleye, 2009).Citizens that are satisfied with the ways things are going in their community, are more likely to use e-government to contact government.

A second measure of issues and constraints that individuals face is their success at finding the information that they want on the Internet (Carter & Belanger, 2005; Streib & Navarro, 2006; Teo, Srivastava, & Jiang, 2008). According to this research, individuals that are more successful at finding information online would most likely turn to this source. Individuals that have more challenges at finding the information, they may

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