Chapter 64

Managing in the Era of Digital Governance:
The Expanding Role and Efficacy of E-Government Innovations in US Social Services

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ABSTRACT

E-government, or digital government, is broadly described as the creation and delivery of information and services inside governments and between governments and the public using electronic information and communication technologies (ICTs). Governments can incorporate ICTs to change administrative processes in ways that are client-oriented and needs based. These changes in administrative processes are part of digital-era governance (DEG) strategies. This chapter examines the administrative and managerial challenges of new electronic modes of transacting social services in the US, highlighting the challenges and outcomes of implementing electronic benefit transfer (EBT) technologies in the child support program.

INTRODUCTION

The wave of electronic commerce has grown exponentially since the 1990s, and a number of federal, state, and local governments have harnessed the potential of the world wide web to improve on

information and service delivery (West, 2005). Electronic government or E-government initiatives began in developed Western countries, most of which shared some responsibility for developing and implementing the Internet (Chadwick, 2003). In the United States, the growth and development of E-government was stimulated by the executive

branch. During the Clinton administration, legislation and initiatives were created to help promote E-government. These efforts were continued and expanded by the Bush administration.[1]

E-government began as the use of the Internet to provide general information about government to the public-at-large. Overtime, E-government developed as the use of web based applications to enhance access to and delivery of government information and services to particular stakeholder groups: citizens, business, and other governmental agencies. The movement to digital-era governance (DEG) involves the centrality of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in changing the basic way government operates and interacts with its constituents. DEG is described by Dunleavy et. al. (2006) as a term that "highlights the central role that IT and information system changes now play in a wide-ranging series of alterations to how public services are organized as business processes and delivered to citizens or customers."

This chapter provides a case that illustrates an important DEG innovation involving government to citizen's interaction using ICTs to better meet the specific needs of social service clients. The chapter's objective is to illustrate several important challenges and solutions in successfully implementing new ICTs into child support programs specifically, and, more broadly, social service programs.

BACKGROUND

We classify government to citizen interactions as: (1) information provided on programs and services to citizens; (2) the ability of citizens to apply for government services or programs, and (3) the ability of governments to deliver program benefits to citizens electronically, typically as cash transfers deposited directly in bank accounts or onto government issued debit cards, some of which have restrictions on their use.

Information provided to citizens on government programs and services through static websites is currently the most common and basic form of E-government (West, 2005). As such, no transactions between governments and citizens occur as the websites simply provide information to citizens (Fountain, 2004). U.S. governments at all levels typically offer this basic level of E-government, as do the governments of most industrialized nations throughout the world.

As the ability to transact with private businesses over the Internet grew in popularity, the demand for E-government services began to rise. The second phase of E-government development allows citizens to conduct transactions with the government by means of portals. Portals are "web based front-end applications that allow state governments to access and manage all of their data and information and deliver it to users" (Center for Technology in Government, 2003). The portal for the U.S. government, FirstGov, was launched in 2000 (Chadwick, 2003). The goal of government web portals is to provide "one-stop shopping" which allows a citizen to enter the portal and easily access any government service instead of having to go to different agency websites. This is the current phase of E-government development of most federal and state governments, and it makes DEG possible.[2]

Programmatically, within the US the early movers in this area of E-Government have been the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and state Bureaus of Motor Vehicles. Citizens can now pay taxes online and receive tax refunds electronically. In most states, it is possible to pay for vehicle registrations and motor vehicle licenses online (Borins, 2002). These services are most regularly provided because they tend to be the most requested by citizens. By far, the biggest concern to citizens is the assurance that any transactions completed online are secure (Cook, 2000).

At the present time, however, most social service programs do not allow online application for services. In 2005, Texas began an experiment

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