

Chapter 98

E-Government in Australia: A Usability Study of Australian City Council Websites

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of e-government signifies a positive way to move ahead in the 21st century with enhanced quality, cost effective government services and a superior relationship between different stakeholders. E-government provides new opportunities to both government and its citizens. The wider acceptance of new communication technologies are helping governments and their agencies worldwide to serve citizens, businesses and other governments with greater efficiency. This chapter looks at e-government development statistics globally before narrowing down to Internet usage and e-government adoption in Australia. Opportunities and challenges of e-government adoption are presented. The chapter then focuses on the current state of e-government in Australian city councils and seeks to evaluate council websites to understand their usability characteristics. Seven Australian capital city council websites have been chosen and evaluated based on factors such as navigation, searchability, layout and visual clarity, information content, communication methods, and transactional services. The research indicates that e-government in Australia is in its early stages and there is scope for further improvement and growth. The high incidence of web presence indicates that government entities, such as city councils are pursuing cyber strategies. Although the majority of government entities utilise websites to disseminate information to the public, optimal use of ICT in the public sector is ad hoc and in infancy albeit growing rapidly. This chapter provides a concise and holistic understanding of issues that can be encountered when exploiting the Internet and ICT for providing e-government services.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The wide proliferation of Internet for conducting business has impacted almost everyone in today's global world. The usage of Internet in other fields has amplified the expectation of citizens (or netizens) that government organisations will provide services similar to those in private organisations with the same efficacy and proficiency. Electronic government (e-government) provides new opportunities to government for providing services to its citizens through electronic means. New technologies, Internet being the key, in this area are helping governments and their agencies to serve citizens, business organisations and other governments both locally and globally. Providing services online is useful for governments' various stakeholders owing to the ubiquitous nature of the Internet. These services can be accessed around the clock and remove time and spatial limitations (Kašubienė & Vanagas, 2007).

Undoubtedly in today's Internet networked world, e-government plays an important role in the delivery of services yet some of the city councils in Australia are slow in utilising technology to serve their citizens. In order to make the transition many city councils in Australia have adopted a 'clicks and bricks' (use of an online channel in addition to a traditional channel for carrying out business activities) strategy to serve citizens in their constituency. This obviously sounds a good way to move forward as it complements other existing strategies of serving their customers e.g. citizens, organisations and other agencies. Since the survival and sustenance of an organisation depends on its capability to redefine and adopt continuous goals, purposes and way of doing things (Malhotra, 2001), it is important that government organisations are not laggards in this area. The Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are an important way of improving the quality and responsiveness of the services that governments provide to their citizens, increasing the geographic reach and ac-

cessibility of their services and providing a faster and more transparent way of access to different government services.

The existing literature (Burt & Sparks, 2003; Sharma & Sheth, 2004; Bocij, Chaffey, Greasley, & Hickie, 2006) focusses upon the potential of the Internet for enhancing efficiency, cost reduction, improvement in the quality of services, flexibility and convenience. So far, in the current literature, there is limited research (O'Toole, 2007; Walsh, 2007) on the state of e-government in Australia, with restricted focus on the overall adoption of e-government by city councils. A lot of literature on e-government in Australia is fragmented and incoherent so this chapter will provide a clear insight into the adoption of e-government by city councils. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the extent of the utilisation of the Internet and ICT in providing e-government services by 7 city councils in Australia. This chapter outlines the state of e-government in Australia before specifically focussing on city council websites. It is important to assess the usability of website deployment as a platform for e-government (Wood et al., 2003). Hence an analysis of the usability of 7 Australian capital city council websites has been carried out and factors relating to navigation, searchability, layout and visual clarity, information content, communication methods, transactional services and others pertaining to online web browsers support and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds have been assessed. The usability analysis is based on evaluation carried out by experts who scrutinize and use a website to discover usability problems that they believe will affect end users (Nielsen, 1994). Various authors have suggested that usability is still one of the main problems that influences and hinders users' interaction and adoption of e-government services worldwide (Al-Sobhi, Weerakkody, & Al-Shafi, 2010; Asimwe & Lim, 2010; Donker-Kuijer, Jong & Lentz, 2010) and there exists a lack of specific research of usability in an e-government context (Huang & Brooks, 2011).

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