

Chapter 5

Incentives for Inclusive E-Government: The Implementation of Contact Centers in Swedish Municipalities

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the focus is on incentives for inclusive e-government. Five case studies of the implementation of contact centers in Swedish municipalities are described and discussed. The research methods used are mainly qualitative interviews with different categories of municipal personnel and with citizens. The main conclusion is that the implementation seems to contribute to increased accessibility of municipal services, even for those citizens who might have problems using Internet services. The study indicates a development towards increased equal treatment of citizens and a contribution to reducing problems related to the “digital divide.” Municipal services became more adapted to citizens’ needs by using citizen-centric methods during the development process and in the daily work of the contact centers. The implementation of municipal contact centers can thus be seen as indicating incentives for local e-democracy and a step towards inclusive e-government, although there is still a need to go further in this direction.

INTRODUCTION

Progress in e-Government implementation continues in most countries (United Nations, 2014). The e-Government concept appeared in early 1990 although it was not put into practice until the end of the decade (Netchaeva, 2002). The main characteristic of the implementation of e-Government has been the ambition to use information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool to achieve more efficient public e-services for citizens as well as for government. Internet use is high in most Western countries, and citizens and businesses increasingly use digital channels to interact with governments (OECD, 2013). Researchers claim that the relationship between citizens and the government is crucial and, ac-

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According to a study in the EEC countries (Blakemore, Mc Donald, Hall, & Jucuite, 2010), it is mediated through a process of understanding citizens' needs and the process of developing citizen trust in the use of e-services. However, there is still the worldwide problem of the digital divide (OECD, 2011) which has contributed to a relatively low use of public e-services (OECD, 2009, 2011). Statistics show a gap between the supply and use of e-Government services, indicating problems with user satisfaction regarding public e-services (OECD, 2009, 2011; Tsatsou, 2011). In fact, around 30% of Europe's population still does not use any e-Government services (European commission, 2010a).

Research also indicates that although there is high accessibility to Internet and broadband access this does not automatically imply effective use (Helbig, Gil-Garcia, & Ferro, 2009). Enhancing the use of online services requires the creation of incentives for citizens and business to embrace more e-Government services while respecting democratic principles such as equity in access. Citizens need to have certain pre-existing knowledge in order to know where to look and how to make use of the information as well as technology. Some citizen groups with low Internet use are the elderly (over age 65), citizens with limited education, and citizens on a low income. Immigrant users also face obstacles when accessing services due, for example, to a lack of technical and language skills. Ironically, many of the excluded citizens are those who need government services the most. The gap between those who regularly access and use the Internet and those who do not have access is part of the so-called "digital divide dilemma." The European commission adopted the communication "European i2010 initiative on e-inclusion - to be part of the information society" (European Commission, 2010a). and recently the commission adopted an e-Government action plan for 2011-2015 aiming at increasing the take-up of e-Government services. The target is that by 2015 50% of citizens and 80% of businesses should use e-Government services (European Commission, 2010b).

Sweden is today one of the forerunners in e-Government developments (United Nations, 2014; WWW Foundation, 2013). The constitutional local autonomy of Swedish municipalities aims to relate democracy and public administration to local distinctiveness and the interests and ideas of citizens. This gives unique opportunities for municipalities to pay attention to and make plans in relation to local characteristics and meet the needs of citizens. Locality and subsidiarity are core values of municipalities as expressed in the local government act (SFS, 1991:900). Trust in local government is promoted by being inclusive, open, accessible and anchored in the local culture (Erlingsson & Ödalen, 2013; Montin, 2007).

The Swedish government has worked extensively on increased use of ICT and provision of broadband infrastructures (Swedish official governmental reports SOU, 1999:85; SOU, 2002:51; SOU 2004; SOU 2005; SOU, 2008:97). The role of the new ICT programs is defined in an action plan, where the importance of using ICT is stressed in order to effectively develop public administration (Regeringskansliet, 2008). This could be done by combining organizational changes and new skills within the municipalities, leading to improved accessibility and understanding for the citizens with the aim to "make it as simple as possible for as many as possible" (Regeringskansliet, 2008). An example of such a change on the local level is the implementation of municipal Contact Centres (CCs). The implementation of CCs include e-services in public administration, which is a dimension of e-Government (Giritli Nygren & Wiklund, 2010) to be used by citizens and public administrators.

There is a lack of studies providing a more qualitative understanding of the change of citizen – government relationships following the implementation of e-Government and regarding citizens' use of public e-services (Axelsson, Melin & Lindgren, 2010; Lindgren & Jansson, 2013) and attitudes towards the

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