Encouraging Society Participation Through Conversations About Public Service Processes

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ABSTRACT

This paper posits the idea that conversations about public services encourage society participation in public issues and establish closer ties between society and government service providers. It is argued that by making society aware of how a service is provided – its process - citizens (clients) may develop a better attitude for interacting with government and other service users, by discussing problems, correcting previously-available information, increasing their knowledge about the processes. This paper presents a tool designed to support conversations about public service processes and the results obtained with a case study of its use. The results suggest that conversations have stimulated interaction among citizens and government services providers as well as allowed identification of service improvement opportunities.

Keywords: Clients, Collaboration Support, Process Improvement, Public Services, Social Software

INTRODUCTION

The practice of Democracy has continuously evolved in order to include changes in the way society and government relate to each other. Many discussions enforce the need to increase society involvement and participation in public issues and decision-making through the use of ICTs (Grönlund, 2009). It is expected that ICTs allow government to be open to citizens, offer new channels for disseminating information, increase citizens’ awareness and participation, and improve operations and integration within and between governments (Allen, 2004; Bryant, 2006; Hague, 1999; Oates, 2008; Shirky, 2008).

E-Democracy and e-Government initiatives argue that society involvement through ICT follows an increasing scale of participation and relationship between government and citizens (Arnstein, 1969; Femers & Wiedemann, 1993;
Gomes, 2004; OECD, 2001). At lower levels, government and citizens have distinct roles and responsibilities, while roles and responsibilities are interchanged at higher levels. It is discussed that closer ties between government and society, i.e. greater interaction and collaboration among them, better understanding about public information and public issues, interchange of roles and responsibilities, greater participation in public issues and decision making etc., must start from the most basic levels of participation and can be continuously evolved towards higher participation levels.

Despite the efforts made to increase public services quality, claims still arise about the challenges for its wide adoption (Andersen et al., 2011). It seems that citizens feel uncomfortable to use online services due to lack of information about how it is executed (some services can be complex and extensive; governed by constantly changing laws and rules); services are run by people who are “invisible” to citizens; and government cannot always monitor service execution from citizens’ perspective in order to address their specific needs. This can cause problems such as misinformation, lack of confidence on the service and indifference to the practice of Democracy, creating a “distance” between service providers and users.

The aim of this paper is to present an approach based on conversations about public services in order to encourage closer ties between government service providers and citizens. It is proposed that public services can be explained to citizens using process models, about which citizens and service providers can talk, promote discussions, exchange information and increase shared knowledge about the way the service is provided. A tool was designed to allow this dialogue and to organize and analyze relevant information obtained from it, serving as a basis for service improvement identification as well as an artifact for improving citizens’ participation.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes proposals for society and government interaction through ICT use in democratic contexts; Section 3 details different levels for bringing together society and government through the use of public services; Section 4 presents the proposed approach for collaborative talking about public services; Section 5 describes the case study conducted in the context of a public institution in order to evaluate the proposal applicability; finally, Section 6 exposes the conclusions obtained with the development of this research and envisions future work.

**INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

Different frameworks (Arnstein, 1969; Femers & Wiedemann, 1993; Gomes, 2004; Grönlund, 2009; OECD, 2001) chase to describe and classify levels of citizen participation in democratic contexts through the use of ICTs. It is common sense that citizen participation follows an increasing scale, with variations in citizens’ participation power, discussion participation level and decision-making in public issues.

The participation levels described by these frameworks can be summarized as:

- **Provision of Information**: Government uses websites to provide citizens both institutional information (history, address, phone numbers and functional structure; links to social networks; news; agenda; government actions in progress; etc) as well operational information, such as budget execution. As an example, we can cite government institutional websites and other websites which try to account for the use of public resources by presenting budget execution information and results indicators and statistics, such as the Transparency Portal of the Brazilian Federal Government (Portal of Transparency), which provides information about the use of public resources obtained from public taxes by Brazilian Government;

- **Citizen Consultation**: Government provides mechanisms for gathering public opinion about information and services provided. As an example, we can cite