Chapter VI

User Help and Service Navigation Features in Government Web Sites

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Abstract

This chapter examines user help and service navigation features in government Web sites and compares them across levels of government. These features are critical to ensuring that users unfamiliar with government are able to successfully and easily access e-government services and information. The research finds clear patterns in the use of similar help and navigation features across governments, leading to a conclusion that these features are diffusing in the public sector Web development field. The chapter concludes by stating that Web developers should work to overcome a second digital divide, one with a lack of knowledge of Web site organization and government structure. Users need to be actively assisted to find information by Web developers.
Introduction

This chapter reports on efforts to make American state, local, and federal e-government portals more user-friendly by providing user help, service navigation, and organizational structures to assist potentially novice users in finding e-government information and services.

Once users have access to the Internet and learn how to use computers, they still have to understand how to navigate Web sites and find the information or services they need. Then, they have to understand how to interact with the Web site so that they can access those services. Governments need to provide more proactive user help features, service navigation features, and organizational structures to actively assist users in finding information and services they desire; otherwise, they create a second digital divide, one between those who understand Web site structure and organization structure and those, who do not. As Hargittai (2003, p. 3) puts it:

many a Web developer wrongly assumes that gaining access to the Internet obliterates any potential inequality that may result from lack of access to the new medium. There are factors beyond mere connectivity that need to be considered when discussing the potential implications of the Internet for inequality. In addition to relying on basic measures of access to a medium, one needs to consider more nuanced measures of use such as user ‘skill.’ ‘Skill’ is defined as the ability to locate content online effectively and efficiently.

Usability in Public Sector Web Sites

Today, West (2005) suggests that there is a great degree of variation among the organization and structure of current public sector Web sites and that not all sites are organized in a user-friendly fashion. Indeed, there is little formal focus on these elements and their importance sometimes goes unheeded. Many government portals and Web sites are designed with government workers in mind, not the ordinary users without experience in government or with the use of Internet services.

Bridging the “digital divide” does not mean just making computers themselves accessible but also involves making the Web sites themselves more user-friendly and easy to use by removing barriers due to lack of experience with the Internet (Nielsen, 2000; Rosenfeld & Morville, 1998). Designers and developers of public sector Web sites must assume that those using their sites have limited training and experience and will need sites that are easy to use and designed with usability and effective information architecture in mind. They must also consider that the design
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