Mobile Government in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

M-government has gained increasing global attention in recent years, especially among developed countries, as a mechanism to reduce costs, increase effectiveness and improve public access to governmental services. The concept is increasingly being adopted in developing countries, however it faces different challenges and opportunities. This study explores the opportunities and challenges for the deployment of mobile government (M-government) services in Saudi Arabia. Collecting data from 77 semi-structured interviews, this study found that there are many opportunities for M-government in the country, requiring increasing awareness amongst the people about the government initiatives of mobile government services and promoting willingness to use these services. This study also highlights different barriers faced by M-government in Saudi Arabia, including issues of internet quality and speed, customization of services and data security and privacy as well as infrastructural challenges and bureaucratic attitude of government departments.

KEYWORDS

Customization of M-Government Services, Data Security and Safety, Developing Countries, GCC, Government Bureaucracy, Infrastructural Challenges, M-Government Barriers, M-Government Opportunities, Mobile-Government, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

M-government is understood as an extension of, and complement to, E-government services and features accessed via mobile devices (Backhouse, 2007). M-government therefore is not a replacement for E-government, but a complement to E-government services. The main focus of M-government is to provide E-government services to the citizens anywhere and anytime through any type of mobile device (Tsai et al., 2009).

Previous studies suggest that there is a high level of mobile penetration among Saudi Arabian citizens, and that mobile users in Saudi Arabia, like elsewhere in the world, are increasingly expecting the provision of services regardless of time and location (Al-Gahtani et al., 2007; Mengistu et al., 2012; Oxford Business Group, 2008). Other than the need to fulfil a growing consumer demand from citizens, the provision of mobile government services is also likely to increase the level of visibility and transparency which characterises the nature of the relationship between the Saudi Arabian
government and its citizens. This consumer demand, in turn, increases the need for effective and efficient services delivered by the government.

Previous studies which explored the opportunities and challenges associated with mobile government were mainly set in the context of developed (particularly European) countries, where the mobile penetration rate is 100 percent (Haaker et al., 2007). Furthermore, a large proportion of the research has concentrated on countries where mobile government has already become an important part of the provision of services, in countries such as Hong Kong, Germany, Estonia and Singapore (Haaker et al., 2007).

With the growth and spread of the use of information technology in the society, changes may appear in government institution to improve services to the public. The government has realized that electronic service channels were not successful and move slowly, they are now searching for an ideal mix of channel to be able to fulfil citizens’ needs and to give citizens choices to use as many channels as possible, including the cheapest and the fastest ones. Therefore, the government needs to meet the demand and transform their activities to increase the efficiency and effectiveness as well as decreasing cost of transaction and time used (Mengistu et al., 2009).

The development of e-Government has begun since many years ago in many countries, some are successful, and some are still being developed, while m-Government nowadays, is in the early stage of development and may define as a new strategy to utilize all kinds of mobile devices, applications and services (Alsenaidy and Ahmad, 2012). M-government provides the additional features for the integration and exchange data communication, especially for the countries that have made a lot of investment in e-Government implementation. The synergy between both of them may become a new method for the interaction and communication between governments and citizens (Alsenaidy and Ahmad, 2012).

World Bank (2012) reports that the use of internet and mobile is increasing rapidly in developing countries including Saudi Arabia. In some developing countries, m-Government has the potential of delivering information on demand and creating real time communications to satisfy public needs. Therefore, Saudi Arabian government has big opportunities to create synergy between e-Government and m-Government plans to accelerate and facilitate the citizen needs due to high penetration of mobile phone users within the country.

Besides the benefits of m-Government implementation, there are some challenges faced by the government in implementing m-Government. Major challenges of m-Government are mostly similar to the e-Government such as infrastructure, human resources and management. But there are some challenges specific to mobile technologies, such as security and privacy issues (Susanto and Goodwin, 2010). More specifically on these mobile issues, Aljerban described some challenges in m-Government implementations (Susanto and Goodwin, 2010).

However, very little research has been conducted concerning the potential opportunities and challenges faced by the implementation of mobile services in countries where it has not yet been introduced. Furthermore, a large proportion of these studies have focused on the introduction of mobile technologies within sectors including the banking industry and the healthcare industry, where such changes are predominantly driven by a desire to increase productivity and focus on the need to cater to consumers (Alshehri et al., 2012). Such examples do not adequately reflect the increased level of complexity which is associated with the introduction of mobile services by the government, where the stakeholders are citizens, government employees, public administrators, tourists and business partners (Bouwman et al., 2008). These issues represent a significant gap in the literature.
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