Chapter 5
Online Resolution and Citizen Empowerment: Tax Appeals and Court Resolutions in North America

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ABSTRACT

In the private sector, the growth in interactive, online technology use has already disrupted many private industries, from medicine to finance to entertainment. Interactive, online technology has empowered consumers, giving them more choices and better information, which has in turn transformed global business. Now it is clear that government services are in the process of a similar transformation. Government agencies face unique challenges in implementing interactive, online technology, and understanding best practices can be a challenge. In this chapter, the authors describe their first-hand experience helping government agencies build advanced online dispute resolution systems. They focus in particular on two case studies: transitioning property tax appeals from a paper-based process to an interactive online process and introducing interactive online technology into the courts. Through this examination, they (1) highlight the unique challenges we encountered and (2) make recommendations for government agency decision makers from the lessons we learned.

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, individual citizens now use information and communications technologies routinely in many areas of their lives. According to the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project (n.d.), 98% of Americans ages 18-29, 92% of Americans ages 30-49, and 83% of Americans ages 50-64 use the internet. In the private sector, this growth in interactive, online technology has already disrupted many industries, from medicine to finance to entertainment. Technology has empowered consumers, giving them more choices and better information, which has in turn transformed business. Now it is clear that government services are in the process of a similar transformation. This individual empowerment is fundamentally changing the relationship between citizens and government, and the significance of this change may yet turn out to be more revolutionary in the public sphere than it has been in the private one.

Most individuals are now quite familiar with the interactive, online technology model of logging into a service provider’s website, picking a username and password, and filling out forms and uploading information. Whenever a question arises about the service in question, the user can log back into the website, check the status of their request or case, post new information, and log out again. This kind of asynchronous, always-on interface is commonplace for people trying to make health care elections for their private insurance plan, or rebalance their 401-K with their bank, or sign their kids up for summer camp. It is also familiar to the billions of people who have used eBay, Facebook, LinkedIn, or any number of online services. But it is still uncommon in government services.

Public agencies move slowly, by design. Investment in public infrastructure is much more deliberate than the private sector. Government rarely is the first adopter of new innovations. But once an innovation has proven its utility, government investments in that innovation can be sustained and long-term. As the internet becomes more ubiquitous, the value of building the future on interactive online technology is beginning to make more sense to public decision makers.

In this chapter, we discuss the efforts of public agencies to implement interactive, online technology to support their work, focused particularly on two case studies we have come to know in depth: property tax assessment appeals and civil claims in courts. First, we discuss the challenges faced by public agencies, and how citizen expectations have shifted over the past decade. Second, we present some background about cloud-based models for software development, and the benefits they can bring to public agencies looking to meet changing public expectations. Third, we examine the property tax appeals process, focusing in particular on efforts to make appeals more interactive and efficient through the use of interactive, online technologies. Fourth, we examine efforts in courts to empower citizens to resolve their own disputes.
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