Exploring IT Opportunities: The Case of the Dutch Elderly Policy Chain

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a growing belief that IT can improve public management in general. The Dutch policy and services with regard to the elderly are no exception. Obviously, IT opportunities in the healthcare domain play a central role in this, since the main objective of policies is to sustain the independent functioning of the elderly in everyday social life. In this research four IT opportunities for elderly policy in The Netherlands are explored through discussion meetings with elderly, and consultation of experts in the field of elderly policy and services. The IT opportunities are designed to align the different levels of motivation and skills of elderly to use IT. Four IT pilot projects are defined, that take into account the costs and benefits of these opportunities to improve the elderly policy chain in The Netherlands.

Keywords: e-health policy; expert consultation; focus groups; health services for the aged; public health informatics

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

It can be recognized as a recent trend that national and European governmental organizations, as well as supranational organizations such as “Brussels,” put priority on the improvement a public customer service, that is, strongly anticipate their citizen’s needs and wishes. Clearly, this is driven by citizens that are more articulate and more aware of what governments can do for them. Also, citizens have access to information that has never been easier to disclose. The result is a need for better anticipation through what can be labeled as “demand driven policy” or “participatory policy networks” (Bongers, 2000; Mayer, 1997). On various levels we see governmental policies that want to adapt to the needs of their inhabitants. Like in many countries, most of the Dutch initiatives to reform public organizations originate from bridging the “gap” between government and citizens.

Looking specifically at the elderly citizens in The Netherlands, we observe that the rapid growing number of aged people have a dynamic life pattern, high expectations for the future, changing needs, wishes, and specific information demands (Ewijk, Kuipers, Ter Rele, & Wester-
hout, 2000). This results in a larger participation in sports, undertaking long trips, studying, and so forth. Consequently, this articulate group of elderly particularly prompts governments to be more citizen-focused. Traditionally, the elderly are a vulnerable group that strongly relies on governmental support. This includes all major policy domains, such as healthcare, housing, work and retirement, transport, social and cultural participation, and so on. Governments increasingly fail to communicate sufficiently with the elderly to meet these increasing demands. For example, in The Netherlands, recently the bottlenecks experienced by elderly people in relation to the government have been the main topic in a discussion meeting with the Minister of Governmental Renewal (Nieuwsbank, 2004). Major complaints concerned forms that are difficult to read as well as the many different forms that need to be dealt with by the elderly. Not only the content of governmental information is criticized, also the medium of communication. Governments tend to experiment with different kinds of information channels, such as video, Internet, and mobile devices, but seem to neglect that many elderly do not use such technologies.

In short, the coordination and execution of government policy concerning the elderly is perceived insufficient. In addition, it can be stated that an efficient and effective incorporation of the needs and wishes of the elderly by public bodies is still missing. To an important extend, this problem concerns the information flow between the elderly, the government, and public bodies. On the one hand, governmental information should be generated and processed efficiently between organizations, in order to reach citizens in a consistent, understandable, and accessible manner. In return, citizens’ demands should flow backwards as organized and regular feedback. How can this exchange of information between citizens and governmental organizations be optimized through the application of IT? In particular, can public services for the elderly be improved by IT-driven solutions? This question is the main trigger for this article. We first present a framework that might be of use to approach end-user problems in the elderly policy chain. Then we present our data collection to evaluate a number of IT opportunities that potentially can overcome these problems, compare, and evaluate them. The last section closes with reflections and some suggestions for further research.

SETTING THE STAGE

From the background of this article, we recall the general movement of the Dutch government to renew itself and turn its public bodies into an efficient chain of citizen-focused organizations. Customer satisfaction has become an explicit part of the strategy of public organizations (Whitehouse, Spencer, & Payne, 2003), including a service orientation that is aimed at delivering products and services “on demand” instead of “from stock” (Arnold & Chapman, 2003). In terms of the well-known value discipline theory of Treacy and Wiersma, public bodies cannot excel in product differentiation or cost leadership, but typically can follow the “customer intimacy” strategy (Treacy & Wiersma, 1993). Although the (competitive) conditions for public organizations remain quite deviant from these of private companies, many characteristics of customer intimacy are promoted by politicians and policy makers, including detailed segmentation, providing public servants with specific information related to a prospect or client, being responsive, empowerment of people working closely with customers, employees trained to respond to individual needs, and so on.

If we project these characteristics on an elderly-focused governmental strategy, the following requirements for apply:

1. Information is available and services are suitable (tailor-made) for an individual elder person
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