Chapter 23

Engaging Citizens Through Local E-Government: an Australian Experience

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ABSTRACT

The early moves to e-Government in Australia were prompted by factors such as government reform, the need to reduce costs and the desire to improve the effectiveness of service delivery. Often these were the objectives of higher levels of government rather than individual councils in the local government sector. While there have been significant improvements in many areas of local e-Government, a number of local councils in Australia particularly those in rural communities are yet to have enhanced their web-based services. The chapter will report on the progress local government in Australia have made towards e-Government implementation, specifically on citizen access to electronic service delivery. The chapter provides a background to the types of electronic information and services provided by local government in Australia and recent moves in Australia to enhance citizen involvement. The research identifies many of the internal and external pressures on local government which are often different from those at higher levels of government. At the local government level, where a significant number of citizen-to-government transactions occur in Australia, e-Government can be as much a barrier as it can be an enabler for citizen access to information and services. The result for local government is often a varied and at times confused approach to e-Government.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last two decades, local government throughout modern Western democracies has been subject to far-reaching reform programs as part of a broader public sector reform drive (Sanderson, 2001). In the 1970s, Western economies experienced simultaneous high inflation and unemployment and the debts of governments grew for the first time since World War II (WWII). Importantly, however, as governments grappled to provide services, citizens started to question the ability of large pervasive gov-
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government to address social and economic problems (Feng, 2003; Sanderson, 2001). The notion of the ‘welfare state’ has gradually been replaced with a generic policy amongst Western governments designed to reduce the size and scope of the public sector. This has often involved attempts to reduce the cost of services yet at the same time improve the services to citizens. Since the 1990s the public sector in Australia has experienced a sustained program where many services have been privatized, or forced to compete with private providers. Governments have restructured the public sector to provide information and services that is more responsive to the needs of citizens and they have put in place a regime of management techniques with a stronger focus on performance measurement (Kloot, 1999; Sanderson, 2001).

In many respects, it is not surprising that e-Government amongst all levels of government can be seen as a natural progression of this new form of public sector ‘managerialism’, or New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991). E-government, in varying ways, has become the vehicle upon which many of the previously none achievable objectives of NPM have been attained. According to Feng (2003), the trend towards e-Government represents a continuation of previous public sector reforms but with a substantial increased role for information and communication technologies (ICTs). Moreover, electronic government challenges the traditional relationship between public authorities and citizens; it provides the opportunity for government to rethink how it configures and provides daily services, build different and deeper relationships with the community, and devolve power and responsibility to regions and local groups (Kearns, 2001).

Much of the focus of the early e-Government implementations often centred upon transactions between identifiable customers (citizens and business enterprises) on one side, and a multitude of independent government organizations in charge of registering, issuing or collecting items or money on the other (Lenk & Traunmüller, 2002). According to Lenk and Traunmüller (2002) it is in the interest of many governments to draw attention to this side of e-Government. Many of the early e-Government policies highlighted the merits of electronic technologies by drawing attention to situations where citizens suffered inconvenience and high compliance costs in dealing with public bodies and promised better service to citizens (Multimedia Victoria, 1998).

Governments, particularly local government, are unique with respect to online activity in that they have the power to dictate rules and regulations, and the possibility to create a legal obligation (Warkentin, Green, Pavlou, & Rose, 2002). In many dealings with governments, citizens have no choice such as to submit town planning permits or pay for a garbage service, compared to the myriad of choices without obligation present in commercial electronic commerce. Moreover, electronic government in contrast to over-the-counter government services, is characterized by a number of key factors that have the potential to change the face of government to the public but require the trust of citizens (Warkentin et al., 2002). These include:

- the extensive use of communication technology
- the impersonal nature of the online environment
- the ease by which information can be collected, processed, and used by multiple agencies
- the implicit uncertainty of using an open technological infrastructure for transactions, and
- the newness of the communication medium. (Warkentin et al., 2002)

These factors highlight both the positive and negative aspects of e-Government. While e-Government may encourage the active participation of citizens in democratic processes, it may disenfranchise those who choose not to or who are