Evaluating and Designing Electronic Government for the Future: Observations and Insights from Australia

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ABSTRACT
This paper uses data from a program of customer interviews and focus group research conducted by the Australian government to develop an electronic services evaluation and design framework. A proven theory building approach has been used to develop and confirm the various components of electronic government (e-government) use and satisfaction from original government studies conducted in Australia and to create the new evaluation framework. Building on the extant e-government literature, the reintroduction of the original data into the framework yielded some emergent observations and insights for future e-government design, including the somewhat paradoxical importance of human contacts and interactions in electronic channels, service efficiency and process factors that impinge on customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and a potential growth trajectory for telephony based e-government for older segments of the community.

Keywords: Australia, Customer Satisfaction, Electronic Government Services, Evaluation Framework, Theory Building

INTRODUCTION
In 2004, the Australian Government commissioned an exploratory study into Australians’ use and satisfaction with e-government services over 2004-2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). This single use study was repeated in 2006, 2007 and 2008 to sample services use and customer satisfaction over time (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006, 2007, 2008). The intent of the study was to explore the following: (1) how people use the electronic and physical service delivery channels to contact government (i.e. the study concentrated on the electronic and physical service domains); (2) satisfaction with these service channels, and the reasoning for the levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; (3) motivating factors and barriers to using online and telephony service channels; and (iv) preferences for future services delivery. Importantly, the study was also directed at assessing what potential changes in the Australian community (e.g. demographic, socio-economic, technological) might impact
future e-government offerings. However, while
the methodology used telephone interviews
combined with community focus groups to
explore specific service delivery issues, no
contextual or evaluative model was developed
for the study.

Over the past twenty years, researchers and
analysts have asserted that the development
of a logical or contextual evaluation model
is an important cornerstone of social science
investigations, commercial assessments and
research inquiries (Bernard, 2000; Bickman
1987, 1990; Bryman, 2004; Chen, 1990; Cooper
& Schindler, 2007; Weiss, 1998; Wholey et al.,
1994). Experts suggest that the model forms a
useful frame of guidance for the description
of constructs and their inter-relationships,
including contextual factors, enabling objects,
outcomes and outputs, integrated behaviours,
and future intentions and preferences (Wholey,
1983). Accordingly, our study was motivated
by the requirement to identify and model e-
government constructs and more fully compre-
hend their relationships. In doing this, we are
able to contribute to a broader understanding
of electronic public services mechanisms and
what directions future e-government designs
might take in the light of changing human and
technological contexts (e.g. ageing populations,
growing work commitments, varying technol-
yogy skill levels). This study combined theory
building practices with the original federal
government studies on electronic services use
and satisfaction to create an evaluation model.
Some of the original data has been reanalysed
in the context of this new model in order to
recursively inform future service design direc-
tions and options for government.

The theory building approach is suited to
this study as it calls for a detailed examination
and analysis of the component parts (i.e. the
original research data and initial results) and
the mapping of the components or constructs
into a higher level representation of the phe-
nomenon under analysis (i.e. the evaluation
model) (Berkley & Gupta, 1994; Glaser, 1992;
Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss &
Corbin, 1990). Indeed by using theory building,
the abstraction and specification of the evalu-
ation model has offered additional insights on
e-government design not previously exposed
during the initial analysis. Accordingly, the
approach adds to our overall understanding,
and highlights the importance, of technical
e-government services and process design
(Chen et al., 2006; Goldstein et al., 2002; Hill
et al., 2002; Karwan & Markland, 2006; Tax &
Stuart, 1997), particularly in the light of such
a substantial consumer research program. The
results of this study are considered to be inter-
nationally applicable and comparable.

The balance of the article is developed
as follows. We discuss the background to the
original study and data collection by the Aus-
tralian government. Next, we develop a discus-
sion of the extant e-government literature that
relates primarily to electronic services design,
implementation and delivery into the commu-
nity. This is followed by a description of the
research method, including the theory building,
and compilation of the proposed evaluation
model. Important trends and results, includ-
ing alternative insights on electronic services
design, from the reintroduction of the data into
the model are discussed. The paper concludes
with a summary of key remarks.

BACKGROUND:
THE ORIGINAL STUDIES

The original commercially based studies were
commissioned by the Australian federal gov-
ernment (through the Department of Finance
and Deregulation) in order to determine what
e-government services were ‘actually wanted’
by citizens, having regard to current services
preferences and future e-government demands.
In taking this stance, the federal government
took a national leadership position on e-
government services, stating that all levels of
government (i.e. national, state and municipal)
needed to ensure ‘citizen founded service deliv-
ery’ going forward, thereby meeting the needs
of individuals, businesses and the community
Online Policy Consultation: A Case Study of Local Government
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/online-policy-consultation/8997?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/online-policy-consultation/8997?camid=4v1a)