Chapter 11
Towards Inclusive E–Government: The Development of Municipal Contact Centers in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, five case studies of the implementation of contact centers in Swedish municipalities are described and discussed with a focus on inclusive e-government. The research methods used are mainly qualitative interviews with different categories of municipal personnel and also with some citizens. The main conclusions are that the implementation of contact centers seems to contribute to increased accessibility of municipal services, even for those citizens who might have problems using Internet services. The study indicates that development towards increased equal treatment of citizens and a contribution to reducing problems is mainly related to the “digital divide.” Municipal services became more adapted to citizens’ needs by using citizen-centric methods and dialogue during the development process and in the daily work of the contact centers. The implementation of municipal contact centers can thus be seen as a step towards inclusive e-government, but there is still a need to go further in this direction.

INTRODUCTION

During the last 10-15 years, e-government has gradually been implemented in most countries. The main characteristic of the implementation of e-government has been the ambition to use information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool to achieve more efficient government and e-services for citizens. Although Internet use is high in most Western countries, recent statistics show a gap between the supply and use of e-government services, indicating problems...
with user satisfaction regarding public e-services (OECD, 2009). In fact, around 30% of Europe’s population still does not use any e-government services (European Commission, 2010). There is, however, a scarcity of studies providing a more qualitative understanding of the change of citizen – government relationships following the implementation of e-government.

The worldwide problem of the digital divide has contributed to a relatively low use of public e-services (OECD, 2009). Some citizen groups with low Internet use are the elderly (over age 65), citizens with limited education, and citizens on a low income. Immigrant users also face obstacles when accessing services due, for example, to a lack of technical and language skills. Ironically, many of the excluded citizens are those who need government services the most. The gap between those who regularly access and use the Internet and those who do not have access is part of the so-called “digital divide dilemma.” In November 2007, the European Commission adopted the Communication “European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion - to be part of the information society” (European Commission, 2010). The Communication is meant to contribute to increased awareness and to national efforts to improve the conditions for everyone to take part in the information society by increasing broadband accessibility and tackling competence deficiencies. Public services should be available on equal terms to everybody, and therefore public authorities need to take into account the interests of all potential service users, following the principle of inclusive e-government.

The Swedish government has worked extensively on e-government and there are several local and regional initiatives for increased use of ICT and provision of broadband infrastructures (Swedish official governmental reports (SOU, 1999, p. 85; SOU, 2002, p. 51; SOU, 2008, p. 97). The government formed a special delegation named “The 24/7 Agency Delegation” to promote and stimulate the development and use of public e-services (SOU, 2004, p. 56). The implementation of e-services in public administration is promoted by the national government (SOU, 2005, p. 19) and is a dimension of e-government (Grönlund, 2006; Giritli, Nygren, & Wiklund, 2010). The Swedish government defines the role of the new ICT programs on the national level in a recent action plan, where it stresses the importance of using ICT in order to effectively develop public administration (Regeringskansliet, 2008). This could be done by combining organizational changes and new skills within the municipalities, leading to improved accessibility and understanding for the citizens with the aim to “make it as simple as possible for as many as possible” (Regeringskansliet, 2008).

One example of such a change on the local level is the implementation of a municipal Contact Centre (CC). There is a lack of studies regarding citizens’ attitudes towards the services produced by contact centers in municipalities, and there are no specific studies made on public opinion regarding these e-government initiatives, except for studies on citizens’ confidence in the Swedish public sector. According to these studies, Swedish citizens have a relatively high confidence in the public sector at both the local and regional level in comparison to other European countries (Statskontoret, 2011).

The overall aim of this study is to analyze the implementation of municipal CCs, focusing on inclusive local e-government aspects with the aim to contribute to an understanding of whether the implementation of CCs can facilitate citizens’ municipal contacts due to increased internal effectiveness. We do so by forming the following research question:

*Does the implementation of municipal contact centers facilitate citizens’ municipal contacts and do they contribute to an increase in the number of citizens getting access to and using municipal services?*

After this introduction, the chapter proceeds in eight sections. The next section presents the background followed by definitions and dimensions of e-government and a short discussion of the contact