Overcoming the Barriers to Accessing Government Online Services in Australia: The Case of Selected Non-English Speaking Migrants

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ABSTRACT

Australia has an inherent desire to afford migrants with a wide range of opportunities, so it naturally follows that government online services should also be available to migrants with a non-English speaking background (NESB). Despite the admirable efforts of governments and local agencies in Australia to provide such services, the reality is that many NESB migrants are not taking advantage of these available services. This case study investigates possible reasons for this issue, as well as suggestions for improvement. In addition, this study, involving interviews with 30 selected Arab residents, identifies language and low computer skills as among the primary reasons why many NESB migrants are discouraged from using government online services in Australia. The results of this case study, in combination with the extensive literature on the topic, show that Australia should implement ICT-based or e-government policies, programs, and services that more accurately reflect migrant cultures and languages so that migrant integration can be more fully accomplished. Specifically, this article presents a NESB model that adopts the value of user-centricity or a more individual-focused approach to government online services in Australia.

Keywords: Barriers to Use, E-Government, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Non-English Speaking Background (NESB), NESB Migrants, Online Services

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important advances enabling people, countries, and institutions to communicate more effectively is the rapid improvement in information and communication technology (ICT). This broad field (ICT) is made up of various sub-categories, such as information technology (IT); information systems (IS); and management information systems (MIS). Each of these elements possesses its own set of complex databases, processes, and infrastructure.

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The most prominent ICT tools being used today include the Internet, mobile audio and video streaming devices, and satellites. By means of such technology, electronic messages and images can be created, edited, sent, received, copied, deleted, or stored (Limwiriyakul, 2009). As ICT continues to evolve, it is an effective mechanism for change in almost all aspects of society, transforming the world into a “digital community” (Limwiriyakul, 2009, p. 129) that prospers on a “digital economy” (Australian Government Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy) (DBCDE, 2011).

In Australia, multiple government agencies have made impressive progress in the use, development, and maintenance of ICT systems to favour its various operations, particularly its interaction with its citizens. Nevertheless, the reality in Australia is that access to government online services is not something enjoyed by all residents. Even when residents do have access many often are not familiar with how to use the services or facilities.

Without a doubt, the Australian government (at all levels) realises the importance of providing necessary information services to residents that have come to Australia from around the world. Many of these are classified as coming from a non-English speaking background (NESB). Accordingly, it is essential to consider the needs of NESB migrants and to identify the barriers that they experience in accessing e-government information and/or services.

This article redirects the emphasis of government information services (GIS) available online from their traditional institution-based focus to one that is more user-focused. Such a user-focused approach integrates the needs and perceptions of NESB migrants and communities in Australia. As a result, it identifies and analyses the barriers between NESB migrant communities and the information services provided by the Australian government.

The ultimate goal of the research presented in this article, therefore, is to establish potential strategies allowing trouble-free access of NESB migrants to government information and social services. One such feasible measure—and one proposed in this article—is the adoption of a new user-centric NESB theory based on Technology Acceptance Theory (TAT), Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), and the Planned Behaviour/Structural Behaviour Theory (PB/SBT) in building or improving extant government online IS (Chen, Sun, Helms, & Jih, 2009; Muscatello & Chen, 2008; Pavlou & Iygenson, 2006; Sharma & Yetton, 2007; Zhang et al., 2008).

Based on their increasing significance in Australia’s socio-economic and political landscape, it is necessary not only to identify and understand the needs of NESB migrants, but also to determine the barriers (both perceived and actual) that NESB migrants experience with regard to government online services (otherwise termed e-government). By developing a new theoretical framework directed at eliminating the barriers for online government service usage by NESB community members, a NESB Model that emphasises on user-centricity is proposed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research exists that reports on the impact of ICT on the performance and competitiveness of corporate and social organisations (see, e.g., Cao, 2010; Elliot, 2011; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011; Niehaves, Klose & Becker, 2009; Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011). These studies include specific attention to problems connected with institution-based ICT programmes and systems, especially the impact of these issues on the external environment—chiefly the target beneficiaries of these ICT initiatives (Bailur, 2007a, 2007b; Kiran, 2006; Rajalekshmi, 2006).

Studies are also increasing related to the use of various features of ICT to aid governments in providing necessary services to the public. This is referred to as e-government or government MIS (Chan, Hackney, Pan & Chou, 2011; Irani, Love, & Montazemi, 2007; Sharma & Yetton, 2007; Zhang, Guo, Chen & Chau, 2008). Research includes e-government processes in specific regions as well as use of ICT in the public sector (Cao, 2010; Zhang et
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