Chapter 15

Citizens’ Perspectives on E-government

Sharon Strover
University of Texas, Austin, Texas USA.

Abstract: This article presents the results of a survey conducted in the state of Texas to assess issues and concerns citizens have in having government provide services over the Internet. The survey presents one vision of what people believe about network-mediated government services and how they interact with them, and it contributes ideas about the sorts of policies and considerations our government agencies might adopt as they move toward a fully realized e-government.

Key words: public opinion survey, e-government services, privacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Using the Internet for public and private information transactions has developed significantly over the last five years. As the citizens gain more experience with emerging online tools and information resources from private sector services, a similar level of service is being expected from government entities. In the many states in the US, legislatures and state leadership are promoting an electronic government agenda. State efforts typically focus on multiple aspects of an Internet-based model of service delivery such as providing information or allowing people to register or apply for certain permits or licenses, often with the intention of simply automating existing services. Other models either proposed or being implementing go beyond simple automation and attempt to re-think the broader nature of government services. Most e-government initiatives include some variation of promises for more or better citizen participation or e-democracy, sometimes noting the new ease with which people can “reach” elected officials or staff. Yet few state government efforts actually have
been able to realize a model that substantially changes the relationship between citizens and government.

At minimum, state governments should ensure that citizens, the potential users of e-government services, are at least prepared to accept and use electronic services, particularly since their implementation can come at substantial cost. This chapter reports on the efforts of one state, Texas, as it attempted to assess citizens’ perceptions about and attitudes toward e-government. The results of the effort were not precisely what the state expected or wanted to hear, but by the same token these unexpected findings are what make them so important.

2. ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT MISSIONS

In early 2001, the US National Commission on Libraries and Information Science reviewed trends in providing public documents to American citizens, and commented that a crisis was brewing around the country (U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 2001). The specific event catalyzing their study was the imminent closure of the federal office, the National Technical Information Service, which had been charged with making public documents available to the public, cataloging them, and maintaining a repository for public information. As various federal agencies were publishing those same documents on the Web, this agency found itself with less to do and a reduced budget, even though no single agency had assumed the repository or cataloging functions. The Commission wrote, “Public ownership of information created by the federal government is an essential right. It not only allows individuals to fulfill their civic responsibilities, but also contributes to an overall improvement in their quality of life. Current information technology not only brings with it expanded opportunities for using government information but also a number of difficulties, including adequacy of finding tools, technological incompatibilities, and sometimes just the overwhelming amount of information” (p. 4). The core problem was not simply one of new agencies performing the same duties as the NTIS; rather, the problem was that not all information was being shared on the Web, that not everyone could necessarily access information that was there, and that there was no repository – no history – for the documents.

The Commission went on to offer 36 recommendations, and several are relevant to ongoing state efforts to launch e-government efforts, particularly their admonishment that the public’s most critical unmet requirements for public information resources be identified.