



Customer orientation in electronic government: Motives and effects[☆]

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Abstract

Electronic government is attested to have the potential to shape public administrations to be more customer oriented. In order to be customer oriented, municipalities need knowledge about customer needs. Which municipalities explore customer needs and what do they change is investigated using data of a nationwide survey about e-government in Switzerland.

Results show big differences in exploring customer needs between municipalities. General characteristics of municipalities and support of administrative leaders and politicians can partly explain these differences. Customer orientation shows effects on the availability of usability features on Web sites and on the selection of topics, to which municipalities provide forms or transactions online.

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1. Introduction

Intensified customer orientation is one of the principal claims of a modern public management. At the end of the century, customer orientation has become a burgeoning theme in public management (Flynn, 1997; Wagenheim & Reurink, 1991; Swiss, 1992; OECD,

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1987). An elementary precondition for an organization to act customer oriented is to have knowledge about customer needs, or in terms of the private sector, to have “market sensing capability” (Day, 1994).

In general, electronic government (e-government) means the use of new technologies in the public sector, especially to exchange information with external parties (Schmidt, 2003). The hope to make public administration more customer oriented often accompanies the introduction of new technologies. Customer orientation is a main issue in e-government (Ho, 2002).

It is essential to know customer needs to be able to be customer oriented. However, the gathering of information about customer needs is not easy and requires resources. In Switzerland, only 10 percent of local governments perform regularly, at least every four years, customer surveys (Schedler & Summermatter, 2005).

This paper will examine two questions. (1) Which municipalities invest in customer orientation and therefore use customer surveys or other methods to explore customer needs? (2) Is there a difference in the proposition of electronic public services between municipalities investing in customer orientation and those not doing so?

2. Customer orientation in electronic government

According to Schedler, Summermatter, and Schmidt (2004) three central statements are key to a comprehensive understanding of electronic government:

- e-government uses information technology, above all the Internet;
- e-government deals with organizational issues of public administrations; and
- e-government considers the interaction of public administration with its environment, that is, with customer, supplier, citizen, politicians, businesses, etc.

Borins (2004) differentiates between the supply side and the demand side of electronic government and adds a political level over these two scopes. It is the demand side consisting of electronic service delivery, e-government, or e-democracy that needs to shape its applications to the needs of the customers of an administrative entity. The political level, it can be argued, is then backing up the administration in its efforts to include customer needs into the development of electronic government solutions.

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, many organizations adopted total quality management (TQM) in response to environmental changes. Over the years, it was not only a topic for industrial firms, but also for service firms and the public sector (Hackman & Wageman, 1995). Du Gay and Salaman (1992) emphasize that an explicit emphasis on the customer, and on establishing a close and direct relationship between organization and customer, and between elements of the organization as if these were customer/supplier relations is central to these quality-focused strategies (du Gay & Salaman, 1992).

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