



The adoption of centralized customer service systems: A survey of local governments

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the adoption of centralized customer service systems in local governments in the United States. Survey data is used to show the relationship between different factors of E-Government adoption and the implementation of this information technology (IT). The results of this study show that the adoption of a centralized customer service system was related to the form of government that the local government had and being located in a central city. The results also indicated that the sophistication of the local government's website was related to the adoption of a centralized customer service system. The results of this study did not support the claim that larger cities are more likely to be adopters of this type of IT. Other results indicate that only 15% of local governments have adopted this IT. These information systems are well-integrated with existing online communication methods such as email and the internet. The information from this IT is commonly used by local governments for performance management and budget development.

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1. Introduction

The study of the adoption of Information Technology (IT) in the public sector has a long history in public administration literature (Brudney & Selden, 1995; Perry & Kraemer, 1979). Many of the early studies have examined adoption of computers in the public sector workplace (Perry & Danziger, 1980; Perry & Kraemer, 1979). With the commercialization of the internet in the late 1990s, numerous studies examined factors of electronic government or E-Government adoption (Brown, 2007; Moon & Norris, 2005; West, 2004). This study is in that tradition, but examines centralized customer service systems as one important facet of E-Government adoption. This article applies the literatures on E-Government adoption and technological innovation to determine its impact on the diffusion of customer service information systems. This research examines survey evidence on its adoption in local governments in the United States.

The definition of customer service systems used in this study is the non-emergency customer service program that centralizes contacts from the public into one system. Some programs will consolidate existing service phone numbers into a single number ("311" or a specific 7-digit hotline number) while some programs operate with calls placed to any agency phone number. All systems route phone calls and other forms of contact (such as internet and email) from the community into a centralized customer service information system.

Essentially, these information systems are able to integrate different departments and centralize customer service requests. The hope of these systems is to break down the silos of information dissemination in public sector organizations. Most of these systems are well

integrated with other communication channels such as the internet and email. This technology is one step closer to making public sector organizations more citizen-centric by focusing on citizens' needs rather than what information and services departments provide.

In order to examine the adoption of this IT in the public sector organizations this article first examines the existing literature on the adoption of E-Government and technological innovation to determine what the key factors that explain its diffusion are. This is followed by a discussion of a survey results on the adoption of a centralized customer service system in local governments. Several hypotheses are developed and tested to determine what the key factors that explain the adoption of this type of IT in local governments are.

2. Technological innovation theory

A review of the technological innovation literature indicates that Rogers' (1995) innovation diffusion theory appears to be one of the most common researchers have accepted for identifying perceived critical characteristics of innovations (Al-Qirim, 2006; Iacovou, Benbasat, & Dexter, 1995; Moore & Benbasat, 1991; Premkumar & Roberts, 1999; Thong, 1999). There also is literature examining the adoption of technological innovations and focuses on public sector organizations (Bugler & Bretschneider, 1993; Hinnant & O'Looney, 2003; Perry & Danziger, 1980).

The technological innovation literature generally shows that technological, organizational, and environmental factors impact decisions to adopt IT (Al-Qirim, 2006; Damanpour, 1991; King et al., 1994). This study adapts Bugler and Bretschneider's (1993) conceptual framework of new information technology adoption in public sector organizations. Fig. 1 provides the conceptual framework used in this study of the perceived impact of factors that predict the adoption of a

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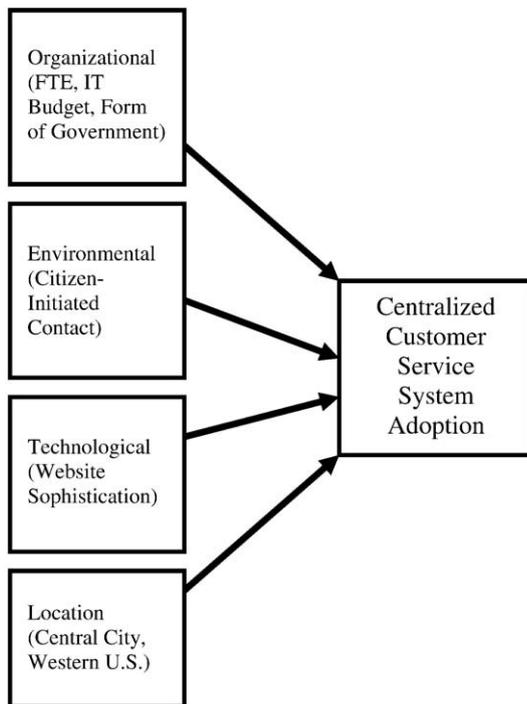


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of technological innovation adoption of centralized customer service systems.

centralized customer service system. One factor added to their model is the location of the local government, which is said to have an impact on E-Government adoption (Holden, Norris, & Fletcher, 2003). The literature argues that technological innovation happens in stages (Layne & Lee, 2001; Tornatsky & Fleischer, 1990). However, there is evidence that the stage model may not always be taking place when it comes to the adoption of E-Government (Brown, 2007).

3. E-Government adoption literature

The literature on E-Government adoption can be used to help explain the diffusion of centralized customer service systems in government. The studies on E-Government adoption that are particularly relevant to this research are citizens' access to E-Government, customer relationship management (CRM) adoption, and local government surveys of E-Government adoption.

3.1. Citizens access to E-Government

Citizens use different service channels for different purposes when making citizen-initiated contacts with their government (Pieterse & van Dijk, 2007; Thomas & Streib, 2003). Survey results reveal that citizens have a strong preference for in-person and telephone communication, even if knowing that these are less convenient (Streib & Navarro, 2006).

It was envisioned that with E-Government citizens would no longer need to know which departments were responsible for what information or services (Ho, 2002). Essentially, functional departments in the one-stop-shop become invisible to citizens. Citizens now expect a faster response, increased access, and improved service from public sector organizations. This means that the traditional structure of public service organizations (based on hierarchical one-way interaction) has become less acceptable in a digital world (Moon, 2002; West, 2004).

Some research has shown that there is a statistically significant relationship between trust and confidence in government and citizens' use of government websites (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Trust in

government is also strongly associated with E-Government satisfaction (Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). However, research also indicates that E-Government has fallen short of its potential to transform government service delivery and enhance citizens' trust in government (West, 2004).

The literature essentially shows that E-Government has the potential to create a one-stop-shop for citizens' access to government information and services. The reality is that it has fallen far short of what was originally envisioned because of the preference of citizens for different service channels depending upon the nature of their transaction with government. E-Government has the potential to increase citizens' trust and confidence in government, which bodes well for governments that use customer relationship management systems.

3.2. Citizen relationship management

Customer relationship management (CRM) can be defined as a holistic management approach enabled by IT with a broad customer focus to optimize relationships by making customers more loyal (Schellong, 2005). CRM uses IT to gather and analyze data to create a more personal interaction with the customer (King, 2006).

Citizen relationship management (CiRM) draws from the concept of CRM in the private sector (Schellong & Langenberg, 2007; Silva & Batista, 2007). CiRM has been defined as an IT enabled strategy with a focus on citizens. Its purpose is to maintain and optimize relationships with citizens and encourage citizenship (Schellong, 2005). CiRM is part of New Public Management (NPM) as an additional concept in the research agenda on E-Government (Schellong, 2005). Among the goals of CiRM is improving citizen orientation, enhancing accountability, and changing the citizen-government relationship (Schellong & Langenberg, 2007).

The most common forms of public sector CiRM can be seen through call centers, especially "311" and web-based one-stop-shop government portals (Schellong & Langenberg, 2007). With the rise of customer expectations from citizen-centric government, many governments are trying to improve their relationships with citizens by adopting CiRM as a single source to answer all queries in one visit or one call (Kannabiran, Xavier, & Anantharaaj, 2004).

Public managers need to recognize that CiRM is an enterprise-wide concept that requires their governments to identify opportunities to simultaneously enhance customer service while reducing costs (Bohling et al., 2006). This is something that is especially appealing to fiscally restrained local governments. CRM adoption has not been as wide-spread in the public sector as in the private sector. The absence of market incentives, the need for higher levels of accountability, the existence of multiple and conflicting goals, and restrictive boundaries have constrained the adoption of these information systems (Pan, Tan, & Lim, 2006). However, the customer service orientation in the private sector has an influence on the expectations towards public sector services using CiRM systems (Schellong, 2005).

3.3. Surveys of local public officials

The majority of the models of E-Government diffusion at the local level argue that diffusion is a linear process with governments proceeding through the various stages of development. The typical stages of E-Government development are (1) providing information online, (2) two-way transactions, (3) vertical integration with different levels of government, and (4) horizontal integration across the organization (Moon, 2002; Norris & Moon, 2005). Some scholars have questioned this linear approach and have found mixed evidence that it actually takes place in local E-Government (Brown, 2007).

Through an extensive examination of several years of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) survey data on E-Government adoption Norris and Moon (2005) found that local E-Government in the United States is principally informational. This

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