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An Investigation of the Perception and Fulfillment of E-government Services

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Abstract: E-government has been adopted around the world to improve the delivery of public services to the citizens and to enhance the effectiveness of public organizations. This study primarily focuses on the perception about e-government, and evaluates the satisfaction attained by the staff-grade officers of Divisional Secretariat in Kucheveli, Trincomale, Sri Lanka. Ten successful interviews were conducted; findings have indicated that, the respondents have positive perception about e-government; however they also encounter some problems in accessing the e-government websites.

Keywords: e-government, perception, adoption, services

Introduction

The advancement of digital technology has played a massive role in the transformation of delivery mode of government services to the citizens, which consequently resulted in the creation of fully-fledge digital government, typically referred to e-government. E-government is a paradigm shift over the traditional methods in public administration, and it isgenerally defined as the delivery of government services and information to the public by the use of electronic media (Monga, 2008, Akman et al., 2005; Horan and Abhichandani, 2006).

E-Government is believed to be a cost-effective model for citizens, industry, employees, and other stakeholders to perform business transactions online. In the traditional approaches, people have to visit a number of government organizations to get a service they want, but due to the technologicaladvancement, and the formation of e-government, citizen can obtain those services at their home by a few mouse clicks. The e-government websites that is presumably a single channel to communicate with government organizations to obtain numerous services (Thomas and Streib, 2003). The scope of e-government services, ranging from posting generally requested information on a website to providing and processing online requests such as, electronic payment of taxes or other fees (Mahadeo, 2009). E-government must also be seen as much more than, moving existing public services on-line: it is about government harnessing IT to redefine its "social technologies", in order to remain relevant in a more participative, more interactive and more informational era (Tapscottand Agnew, 1999).

E-government is becoming very popular around the globe, due to its ability to deliver public values tocitizens (Karunasena andDeng, 2012). In addition to the improved public services, e-government adoption has enhancedthe effectiveness of public organizations and resulted in the increase of their efficiency, accountability and transparency (World Bank, 2005; Kaaya, 2009). It also brings a number advantages such as, improved quality of life, better access to education, bridgingdigital divide, active participation in government, eradication of distance, and reduction in the cost of communication and information (Norris, 2001; Jaeger andThompson, 2003; Hanna, 2008). These promising benefits of e-government have inspired the governments worldwide to embark on e-government projects, and to implement a variety of e-government plans and policies for providing value services to citizens (United Nations, 2010; Zhao, 2010).

Sri Lankan E-government Project

E-government has been adopted worldwide, because of its capability to deliver values for citizen (Karunasena and Deng, 2012). Every government, realizing the importance and paramount benefits, has embarked on such a huge billion dollar worth projects.

The government of Sri Lanka had officially launched the e-Sri Lanka project in 2002 with the assistance of the World Bank, in order to improve the public services delivery, and achieve a vast number of socially desirable outcomes (ICTA, 2005; Hanna, 2007). This project, being implemented by the Information and Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA) consists of five programmes namely: (a) a re-engineering government program, (b) an information infrastructure development program, (c) a human resources capacity building program, (d) a regulatory environment development program, and (f) an e-society development program in the e-Sri Lanka initiative. There are 32 main projects under the banner of . ePensions, , , , , , and are few to name here.

According to the E-government Survey rankings (2012) by the United Nations, the Republic of Korea is the world leader (0.9283), followed by the Netherlands (0.9125), the United Kingdom (0.8960) and Denmark (0.8889), with the United States, Canada, France, Norway, Singapore and Sweden close behind. The table 1 shows the E-government Survey rankings of the South Asian countries. Maldives (0.4994) is ranked at the 95th place in the world, followed by the Iran (0.4876) in 100th place. Sri Lanka (0.4357) occupied the 115th place in the world in 2012 but it was in the 111th place in 2010. The steady improvement of e-government activities in other countries could be one of the reasons for the setback in the ranking of Sri Lankan e-government implementation.

Table 1. E-government Survey Rankings

Country	E-Government 2012	Rank 2012	Rank 2010
Maldives	0.4994	95	92
Iran	0.4876	100	102
Sri Lanka	0.4357	115	111
India	0.3829	124	119
Bangladesh	0.2991	150	134
Bhutan	0.2942	152	152
Pakistan	0.2823	156	146
Nepal	0.2664	164	153
Afghanistan	0.1701	184	168

Source: United Nations E-Government Survey 2012

There is a lack of rigorous assessment of the public value of e-government; hence, even a study of this nature is significant to the government, aid organizations, and other developing countries (Hanna, 2008) for better understanding the impact of e-government on citizens and the society, which leadsto better policies and strategies for the continuous development of e-government.

The e-government projects are undertaken to improve the capacity of public administration to serve the citizen, better. For instance, if the services that are required by the citizen can be obtained through an e-government website, the citizen can freely access the site at their own convenience. The success of e-government implementation can be justified if it really produces what it has promised. The project of e-government in Sri Lanka was originated with the involvement of huge amount of investment from the government and the aid organization. Some studies indicate the performance of e-government has effectively improved its global e-government readiness (UNDESA, 2008;Mia and Dutta 2009), but these studies fail to gauge the performance of e-government from the citizen perspective (Hanna 2008).

Karunasena and Deng (2012) are in the opinion that, e-government in the developing countries like Sri Lanka is not that mature, and they also highlighted the vital factors for assessing the value of e-government in Sri Lanka, such as, the distribution of quality

information and services, user-orientation of information and services, efficiency and responsiveness of public organizations, and contributions of public organizations to the environmental sustainability. Therefore, this preliminary study was undertaken to understandthe government officers' perception about e-government and their satisfaction over the services they received through e-government websites.

Method

Qualitative method was considered appropriate for the purpose of this study. This method is deemed to be more appropriate in a situation when 'why' and 'how' questions are to be answered by the respondents and when a smaller and focused sample is selected for the study (Denzinand Lincoln, 2005; Cresswell, 2003.)

Since the researchers assume that, the government officers are the most frequent visitors to the e-government websites, data for this preliminary study are collected from the staff-grade officers attached to the Divisional Secretariat of Kuchchaveli, Trincolmalee. Ten successful face to face interviews were conducted with the officers, representing different departments, such as, planning, accounts, administration, land management, coastal conservation, and audit. Having obtained proper appointments from those officers, the structured interviews were conduct at their office with help of predefined open-ended questions. The following section presents the results for the study.

Result and Disscussion

Sri Lanka has officially launched the e-Sri Lanka program in 2002, with the aim of defusing the power of ICT for the development of the nation (ICTA, 2004). However, it is questionable to what extent all these initiations have created real value for the citizens. Karunasenaand Deng (2010) have stated that, the e-government development is not that much mature, and it is vague as there is a lack of survey on the usage of this kind of project. At the backdrop of the above condition, this preliminary study was undertaken to explore to what extent the e-government services were received by the staff-grade government officers.

Through the interviews conducted with the staff-grade government officers attached to the Divisional Secretariat of Kuchchaveli, Trincomalee, it was found that, all of them use the Internet for various purposes, such as, entertainment, education, online transaction, searching information and so on. The majority of interviewees frequently access the websites of government and public organizations, to update their knowledge and to receive information circulated by the government, time to time. One of the factors identified as the hindrance to the adoption of e- government is the lack of IT skill (Karunanandaand Weerakkody, 2006). Nevertheless, in the case of the staff-grade government officers, interviewed, we found that, they are very skillful, and ready to accept e-government system, and to use any new services and features that are introduced in the e-government website.

E-government websites are considered as a vehicle to reach the citizens in order to offer more services at lower cost (Whitson andDavis, 2001). There are a number of services offered by the Sri Lanka e-government websites. All of the interviewees access the website of Government Information Centre (GIC), and are aware of the services, such as, e-pension, e-results, e-forms e-divisional secretariat service, e-population registry and e-BMD (Birth, Marriage, Death). However, a very few of them have mentioned about e-visa and e-monitoring. This indicates that, these services are rarely used by few people. E-result is one of the widely used services to check the result of exams of grade 5 scholarships, GCE (ordinary Level) and GCE (Advanced Level); e-form is to facilitate the public to download important applications; e-pension is to help applicants find out the status of their applications for pension and their current status with regard to their application. The interviewees were able to recall the most frequently visited websites; such as; the official website of government (www.gov.lk), Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs (www.pubad.gov.lk), Ministry of Finance and Planning (www.treasury.gov.lk) and Government Information Centre (www.gic.gov.lk). The services offered by the government can be clarified by calling the call center of the Government Information Centre (GIC), which is in operational throughout the day.

The interviewees have stated that, e-government services are advantageous in terms of, time saving, cost reduction, and quick responses. Moreover, the time wasted in getting services from the government departments through the traditional method has been marginalized by the e-government services, where the users can get their services just by clicking the mouse; furthermore, the absence of direct human involvement in carrying out the particular task has increased the accurate delivery of the service. One of the interviewees has mentioned that, the governments circulars are made available online, which help them immediately implement government instructions. They have also stated the bad experiences occurred when downloading some important documents from the sites; sometimes they were unable to download the necessary documents, and experienced dead links or missing specific documents.

Majority of the interviewees are of the opinion that, the e-government websites are visually appealing, and have clear content page with attractive templates in all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English; and these physical characteristics of the websites enticed them to visit those sites, and to use e-government services. This shows that, they have a positive attitude towards the adoption of e-government. Some of the interviewees have expressed that, the contents of the website are not logically and sequentially ordered. Therefore, the visitors need to browse through the whole haphazardly displayed contents to find the required one; however, few respondents have denied this statement, which exhibits the perceptual differences among the interviewees. Three of the respondents have strongly expressed that, they were unable to access a particular site due its non-availability; instead they get "URL is not available", message. Furthermore, they have complained that, the site takes too long time to display the full contents of the page. It is presumed that, the site is occasionally slow or down, due to the server related issues.

When requesting a specific service from the e-government website, the receipt of service request will be acknowledged via e-mail, SMS (short message service) or telephone call. Four of the interviewees expressed their displeasure over the deficiency of the service. Two of them have not chosen such service.

Others have expressed happinesswith the responsiveness of the e-government service. Further, interviewees were asked whether they have got the service requested, delivered. The answer was 'yes', which indicates that, the promise of the e-government service are kept as intended. Though the majority of the information on the website is understandable and accurate, according the interviewees, some of the messages and announcements are found to be obsolete. Therefore, trustworthiness of the information displayed on the website is doubted.

Conclusion

The discussion of the findings had revealed that, all the staff-grade officers are well aware of the most of the services offered through the e-government websites, and they have tried to use those services. Further, they are with very positive mindset to continuously obtain the services through these sites, and majority of them are satisfied with the available systems and services. However, few problems were identified and categorized as follows: (a) missing URL, bad link and slow-speed, (b) lack of prompt response, (c) obsolete information, and (d) mix of some contents.

One of the objectives of e-government system is to deliver a quick service to the citizens. But, due to the ignorance of some elements and malfunctioning or breakdown of the system, the functionality of the e-government websites will be affected. Due to the non-availability of URL, bad link, or if the website takes too long time to access or to download a document, the one who is trying to get the service will discontinue using these sites, which will finally lead to the failure of e-government adoption. Satisfaction of the user can be enhanced, if they can get a prompt response to their request, and delivery of what they require, in time. Obsolete information is also a critical problem, as the users are entirely dependent on up-to-date information to carry out some specific tasks; in case, if they get wrong or outdated circular, it will definitely affect the succeeding activities. Furthermore, the information displayed on the website should take the visitor to the correct destination. Therefore, the content of the website should be arranged logically and sequentially. The e-government adoption in Sri Lanka is still in the

development phase, so the government can take appropriate measures to rectify those problems.

The findings of the study are purely based on the perception and experience of staff-grade officers, who are computer literate. In order to measure success of e-government initiation, the study should be expended to include sufficient number of samples, representing the whole citizens of Sri Lanka.

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