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Service Delivery in One-Stop Government Portals – Observations Based on a Market Research Study in Queensland

Christoph Peters
Research Center for IS Design
Kassel University
Kassel, Germany
christoph.peters@uni-kassel.de

Thomas Kohlborn
Faculty of Science and Technology
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
t.kohlborn@qut.edu.au

Axel Korthaus
Faculty of Business and Law
Victoria University
Melbourne, Australia
Axel.Korthaus@vu.edu.au

Erwin Fielt
Faculty of Science and Technology
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
e.fielt@qut.edu.au

Andrew Ramsden
Smart Services Queensland
Queensland Government
Brisbane, Australia
Andrew.Ramsden@smartservice.qld.gov.au

Abstract

New government service delivery models based on a “franchise” metaphor are being proposed recently to allow more citizen-centric service delivery by decoupling the government’s internal departmental structure from the way services are presented and delivered to citizens. In order to evaluate the approach from an online channel perspective, the Queensland Government commissioned a market research study to compare their websites with the online presences of the UK Government and the South Australian Government, who both have adopted the “franchise” approach. The study aimed to inform an understanding of citizens’ preferred model for interacting in the online channel and to identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of the existing websites. In this paper, we will a) report on the findings of this third party usability study and b) position the study, in the form of a critical reflection, against the background of a more comprehensive “Transformational Government” approach using a “franchise marketplace”. The critical reflection points towards limitations of the study with regard to this bigger picture and discusses the potential benefits of service bundling that remained unconsidered in the study.

Keywords

Service delivery, e-government, one-stop portals, usability study, service bundles.

INTRODUCTION

Organisations in the private sector are under increased pressure to operate effectively and efficiently, while at the same time focussing on customer satisfaction. Nowadays, these challenges also apply to governments in the public sector. Thus, information and communication technology has been introduced to deliver an increasing number of services electronically. These activities can be subsumed under the term e-government, which aims to

“enable and improve the efficiency with which government services and information are provided to citizen, employees, businesses and government agencies” (Carter and Belanger 2004).

In comparison to most organisations in the private sector that often focus on specific customer groups, governments typically have to deal with a huge heterogeneous portfolio of different services, which generally have to be offered to all citizens (Wang et al. 2005). Consequently, accessibility to government services and information has to be ensured for all citizens (Gouscos et al. 2002), whereby different groups of citizens will have different characteristics and demands. With regard to communication channels for delivery of government services, the online channel has probably become the most important for governments due to its cost efficiency. Thus, governments have an inherent interest in the adoption of the online service delivery channel by their citizens. Consequently, content and structure of government portals need to focus on those varying needs and aim at the “customers” (= citizens, residents and businesses) satisfaction (Kubicek and Hagen 2000).

In light of these requirements, governments have to decide on a specific online service delivery model, which determines both structure and content of the governmental online presence. Since the early days of e-government, jurisdictions from an internal managerial perspective have been focusing on standardisation, departmentalisation and operational cost-efficiency, which (Tat Kei Ho 2002) has labelled as the traditional bureaucratic paradigm. Often, the way that public services offered to citizens were grouped together was determined by the internal structure of the specific government. Each department offered their services on separate web sites independently from the online offerings of other departments.

More recently, in part because e-government has not always delivered all the benefits that were hoped for (Dada 2006), a more holistic view of required government reform strategies has been proposed under the term “Transformational Government”, which has been defined as “a managed process of ICT-enabled change in the public sector, which puts the needs of citizens and businesses at the heart of that process and which achieves significant and transformational impacts on the efficiency and effectiveness of government” (OASIS 2011). Proponents of the “Transformational Government” approach promote a new business model for governments that introduces “a new virtual business layer within government, focused round the needs of citizens and businesses (the “Franchise Marketplace”), which enables the existing silo-based structure of government to collaborate effectively in understanding and meeting user needs” (OASIS 2011). The “franchise” metaphor is used here to denote collaborative organisations for specific customer segments for government services (e.g. parents, motorists, disabled people), following the principle of “Build services around customer needs, not organisational structure” (OASIS 2011), which requires governments to re-think and re-design their service delivery on all levels of the organisation. At the front end, governments have started to investigate the use of one-stop online portals (OSPs) (Kohlborn et al. 2010b) following the desire to further increase customer satisfaction and operational excellence. These portals commonly apply the ‘single window concept’, i.e. they offer a single point of access to electronic services and information provided by different public authorities or even private service providers (Wimmer and Tambouris 2002).

Facing these trends and the underlying pressures, Smart Service Queensland (SSQ), an Australian state government agency that serves as the “front door” to the public by delivering all services offered by the Queensland Government to businesses and citizens, decided to advance the maturity of their online service delivery. This initiative involved the identification of the benefits of alternative service delivery models as well as the corresponding implementation steps required. As a foundation, an investigation of the relative performance of the current online presence of the Queensland Government compared to the online presences of the United Kingdom (UK) Government, one of the leaders in e-government (Accenture 2009; United Nations 2008), and the South Australian Government was commissioned. Both the UK Government and the South Australian Government have adopted the “franchise” approach. The aim of the investigation of the study described in this paper was to understand citizens’ preferred model for interacting in the online channel and to identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of the existing websites. The market research (MR) was conducted by an expert service provider in the field, from now on referred to as MR company, and involved a representative sample of the Queensland public to assess all three websites.

Having collaborated with the Queensland Government in the context of the Smart Services CRC¹, the researchers were asked to accompany and contribute to this research commissioned by SSQ. The researchers’ project work focuses on service portfolios in both the private and public sector, and, within this context, puts particular attention to service bundles and their strategic role within service portfolios. The researchers participated in the market research sessions as critical observers, which allowed gaining important and valuable insights feeding into the research agenda of the larger collaborative research initiative.

¹ For further information, please refer to <http://www.smartservicescrc.com.au>

This paper will review the findings of the commissioned market research and reflect on the observations made in this study². The findings of the usability study produced by the MR company and the critical reflection contributed by the authors of this paper not only provide important insights for the governmental partner regarding current opinions and behaviours of a representative sample of its target users. Even if their generalizability is limited, they will also be of interest to all governments that are currently on the verge of considering the development of a one-stop portal as a part of their journey towards the next stage of e-government, i.e. transformational government, as currently drafted and proposed by Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS). By positioning the study against the background of a comprehensive transformational government approach and discussing the potential benefits of service bundling, which maps to the idea of creating customer franchises but remained largely unconsidered in the study, the paper also makes an academic contribution and extends the existing body of knowledge with regard to service bundling and service portfolios in the public sector.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of related research in this field. Section 3 presents background information of the research setting and outlines the roles of both, the company conducting the market research sessions and the university researchers acting in the role of critical observers. Also, the objectives of the market research sessions are presented. After outlining the used methodology, we describe the sample selection process and its reasoning. Then, we provide a detailed description of the report created by the conductor of the market research sessions before we present our critical reflections as the sessions' observers. Additionally, we will discuss the development towards "Transformational Government" in some detail in the critical reflection section of this paper. The conclusions summarise the most important findings and highlight the contribution to the field.

RELATED WORK

For the related work section, we will not discuss sources related to the discussion of transformational government approach, as this will be part of the critical reflection section. Here, we focus on evaluating online service delivery only. Online service delivery models in a government context typically relate to government websites or portals and their analysis is either focussed on the 'supplier side' or 'consumer side.' A supplier side analysis aims at analysing the website with regard to certain features, utilising content analysis as a research method. A consumer side analysis, on the other hand, typically involves end users evaluating the web site by providing scores for various attributes to measure their overall perception, thus using surveys or interviews as a research method.

A supplier side analysis of the government website or portal relies on the specification of certain features that are deemed related to achieving high-quality websites or portals (Melitski et al. 2005). Unfortunately, there is neither a common agreement on the set of relevant features nor on the scales to measure them. Analyses also cover a wide range of scenarios by focussing on different levels of government online delivery models, i.e. federal (West 2008), state and municipal (Carrizales 2006). Content analysis is often used to benchmark different sites as it provides a relatively objective way to rank the sites. (United Nations 2008; West 2008). These types of studies typically involve analysis of a large number of websites by a limited number of participants to measure the features in focus.

A consumer side analysis of the government website or portal requires the conceptualisation of different constructs that are considered to be related to the user's perception of quality and satisfaction, which is similar to the requirements for utilising content analysis. The main difference lies in the way to measure or operationalise the constructs. The focus of such studies is on the end users' perception of these constructs, so they require end user participation either in interviews or by answering various questions as part of a survey or questionnaire (Kaisara and Pather 2011). The constructs for such models can either be based on empirical research or derived from related research areas. For example, there are many studies in the field of human computer interaction and usability research that deal with the right level of information consumable by the websites' users (Shneiderman 1997) or usability principles in general (Nielsen 1993). Typically, these studies analyse the perception of a statistically significant number of end-users in regard to one website or portal in order to analyse the relationships between constructs, such as quality, satisfaction, or adoption. Nonetheless, neither the types of constructs nor the measurements are agreed upon in literature. Thus, there are major differences in the scope and depth of these studies.

However, to the knowledge of the authors only a limited number of studies actually take different online service delivery models with different underlying philosophies and compare them as described in this paper. To the best

² SSQ has authorised the authors of this paper to report on the findings of the MR company's usability study for the purposes of this publication.

of the authors' knowledge there is still a lack of published market research providing useful input for decision making with regard to the selection of a superior service delivery model in a government context.

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

Each department of the Queensland Government has its own (sub-) website and is responsible for delivering all relevant services within that online area. The (sub-) websites of the departments are linked within the Queensland Government's portal, which basically functions as a gateway. Contrarily, the UK one-stop portal aims at providing access to information and government services in one place based on presenting customer-oriented bundles of services to the customers. It is important to note that the boundaries of these bundles cannot be seen as the boundaries between the existing departments. They are much more flexible, taking into account that users digest provided government services differently. The bundle-approach is supposed to lead to a much more citizen-centric service provision when implemented adequately. In order to analyse the potential effect of cultural influences, the portal of South Australia has been included in the study. South Australia is currently implementing a one-stop portal for their online delivery of services. However, the portal cannot be considered as mature as its UK counterpart.

In this context, as mentioned earlier, the overall goal for SSQ was "to gather a holistic view of what customers think of the proposed franchise model of online government services and identify any problems with various models." The study's objective included, as mentioned earlier, to understand customers' preferred model for interacting with Queensland Government in the online channel, and to understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of existing websites and approaches for presenting government information online.

The market research sessions of the MR company were designed to address the following questions, among others:

- How do customers locate government information and what are paths commonly taken to find information?
- Do customers get confused when navigating between portal sites and agency sites and vice-versa and does this affect their user experience?
- What overall model do customers prefer based on their use of various government sites?
- Which overall model is more efficient for customers?

Questions that guided the critical reflection of the study by the authors of this paper were intended to provide further insight for addressing SSQ's overall goal stated above:

- Was the study comprehensive enough to establish superiority of a particular service delivery model?
- How can the study be positioned with regard to the larger goal of embarking on a transformational government reform strategy?
- Which role can service bundling play in a franchise-based service delivery model context to improve customer satisfaction?

METHODOLOGY

From a methodology perspective, two aspects need to be clearly separated.

Firstly, the design of the market study will be described. It is important to note that this design was beyond the control of the researchers, as it was the responsibility of the MR company. The market research can be characterised as an observational usability study (Nielsen 1993) in an experimental setting. An observational approach provides several advantages and disadvantages. The main benefits are twofold. First, the reality aspect is prevalent, i.e. the study covers events in real time. Second, also the concept is captured. As disadvantages one can regard its time-consuming characteristic and the threat that the study proceeds differently, because participants are feeling unfamiliar with being observed while performing the task. The latter disadvantage could be mitigated through the setting described below.

The observation was conducted in a permanent usability laboratory at the facilities of the contractor the Queensland Government had selected. As recommended by (Nielsen 1993), the facilities comprised two main rooms: a test room and an observation room. The participant and a facilitator were sitting in the test room. From here, the participant's face and his/her screen were videotaped and the sound (the participant's oral expressions) was captured. Thus, the think aloud method could be applied. This method is designed to not only capture the final task completion, but also its process. In addition, it encourages the user to articulate whatever he/she does

(Lewis and Rieman 1993). The advantages of participants thinking aloud are various, e.g. one can anticipate and trace the source of problems much more easily (Rubin and Chisnell 2008).

Two of the authors of this paper were sitting in the observation room, accompanied by delegates from our government partner. Within the observation room, the screen of the participant and the face of the participant were projected via a data projector. This was supported by a usability testing and market research software, which also reproduced the sound from the test room, i.e. the articulated thoughts and answers of the participant as well as the questions of the facilitator. This highly recommended setting allowed us to discuss user actions without disturbing the user when they occurred. As these sessions were also recorded, it is also possible to re-examine them. Each session was conducted within a 90 minute timeframe and with one participant only.

The participants were supposed to be a representative sample of the Queensland public. 44 market research sessions were conducted in both, urban (61%) and rural areas (39%), with participants that have not participated in any web usability testing within the last 6 months. The number of male and female participants did not differ more than 20% overall. Also, other demographical requirements to ensure representativeness of the sample, such as age groups, educational and occupational background, household incomes and Internet usage confidence, were taken into account. As an integral prerequisite, participants had to have used a Queensland Government website in the past 6 months. The sample included business owners, indigenous Australians and people who have a visual or cognitive impairment. As incentive, all participants received 75AUD for the session.

The second aspect, from a methodology perspective, relates to the contribution made by the authors of this paper. The aim of the qualitative research was to provide a critical reflection of the study based on the researchers' involvement as session observers and to theorise by anchoring the observations in the broader literature on transformational government. The approach can be categorised as explorative research, as the problem has no clear definition yet and more insight is required. The objective of exploratory research is to gather preliminary information that will help define problems and suggest hypotheses. In the following, we will start by describing the findings from the market study in more detail.

FINDINGS FROM THE USABILITY STUDY

Based on the analysis of the data that was captured during the market research sessions, the MR company presented the following key findings in their report, which we will briefly summarise below:

Search engine optimisation is critical

In an attempt to answer the first study question, the pathways chosen by participants to find government information have been examined. The goal was to identify how website visitors use and navigate through government websites and to better understand the natural browsing habits of the participants. Therefore, participants were asked to recreate a service encounter that they had recently performed visiting the Queensland Government websites. Taking into account the findings of analysing the navigation paths of all participants, mostly four distinct first steps were taken to arrive at the relevant services, which are displayed in Table 1. Users either used the search engine 'Google' as a starting point or they tried to find information starting at the respective government's or department's website. However, most users were unaware of the governments' website address. Navigation paths comprised in "Others" in Table 1 are for example other search engines such as Microsoft's Bing. For all three websites, at least 80% of the users started their search for a service with the search engine Google.

Table 1: Comparative overview of starting points for finding a service

	Queensland	South Australia	United Kingdom
Google	82%	80%	87%
Government homepage	6%	12%	9%
Department site	7%	3%	1%
Others	5%	5%	3%

The results clearly show that Google as the Internet's most favoured search engine plays the dominant role regarding pathways to government websites. Thus, the report concludes, search engine optimisation is critical, so that Queensland Government sites are ranked highly for key search terms. Thereby, explicit consideration should be placed on the fact that several users ignored sponsored links.

Users are currently satisfied with the existing Queensland approach, but prefer franchise sites after frequent use

The next aspect examined was the preferred model for interacting with government online. Users were asked to complete a task on one of the three government websites which they already attempted on the Queensland Government website during the last six months. After completion of these so-called “real-life” tasks, the users were asked to rank the websites in order of personal preference. For the highest preference three points were given, two points for the second highest and one point, respectively, for the lowest preference. As a result, users were in favour of the websites of South Australia and Queensland with both 43 points versus 28 points for the UK Government sites. The preference for the Australian sites was explained with the higher level of familiarity due to two facts: the tasks were already performed at Queensland’s Government websites before and the UK websites included linguistic particularities the Australian test users were not used to. Also, the consistent user experience layout of the Queensland websites featuring a prominent Queensland Government logo was perceived more trustworthy than the brandings of the UK government sites called DirectGov and Businesslink, which are perceived as “made-up” by the users. For government websites, users prefer the government to be mentioned explicitly.

In order to identify an overall preferred model, users were then asked to perform a number of prescribed tasks. After a participant completed all tasks for one website, they were asked to evaluate the website in five different categories on a scale between 0 (strongly disagree) and 10 (strongly agree). The rating criteria and results of this assessment were chosen by the MR company and are displayed in Table 2:

Table 2 User satisfaction for each criterion for each region after all tasks for a website were completed

Criterion	Queensland (QLD)	South Australia (SA)	United Kingdom (UK)
Right level of detail	7.71	8.26	8.43
Reliability	8.45	8.79	8.55
Easy to complete	6.93	8.21	8.02
Clear and easy to understand	7.36	8.24	8.07
Visually appealing	6.85	7.38	7.20

These results are described as minor differences between the regions in the report. Still, it is outlined that Queensland performed lowest on all levels of satisfaction.

After all tasks were performed, users were asked to rank the three websites in order of preference again. This was done to capture the difference in perceived usability before and after the execution of prescribed tasks. Interestingly, a “significant switch” of preference could be monitored and the websites of the UK (49% of votes as most preferred model) outperformed the websites of South Australia (23%) and Queensland (28%) clearly. Some users had difficulties to choose their preferred model. They liked the level of information on the websites based on the franchise service delivery model and “the way in which it was set out”, but were more familiar with the Queensland websites based on the traditional approach. The report draws attention to the test environment this switch was achieved in and concludes that in the real world such a change of preference could take much more time as users do not perform as many tasks as in the testing scenario. The report also distinguishes between users from Brisbane and Rockhampton as well as between general users, business users and customer service advisors of the Queensland Government, but due to the limited space these aspects are left out of this paper. The report summarises by stating that “users are currently satisfied with the existing Queensland approach, but prefer franchise sites after frequent use” and in terms of satisfaction all three regions performed to a “relatively similar standard”. As users were also asked to highlight 10 out of 50 adjectives after they had completed all tasks for one website, so-called word clouds could be created. In this context, the UK Government site’s word cloud particularly highlights words such as understandable, convenient, usable, useful and detailed. The choice of adjectives was not as positive for the other two websites.

No single model appears to be more efficient and easier for users

The comparison of the service delivery models in regard to efficiency is measured by a task completion rate. The completion rate was assessed by the session conductors after each task. The possible ratings were: ‘Easy’ (task is completed easily), ‘Medium’ (user took one or two attempts, and experienced some difficulty), ‘Hard’ (user took more than two attempts, and/or experienced a great deal of difficulty) and ‘Fail’ (user was not able to complete the task). Here, the UK sites had the lowest completion rates – despite the fact that they were the most preferred ones. Overall, the report states that “no single model appears to be more efficient and easier for users” and when looking at overall completion rates, all three regions were very close and there is no clear leader. As

implications, it is noteworthy to consider the following factors which highly influence user satisfaction: visual design (including consistency), trustworthiness and credibility of the site, information design and previous experiences on these sites. The report concludes that “users must be able to complete their tasks with relative ease whichever model is chosen”. However, it states that the franchise approach can be advantageous because of the “overall consistency of experience” that can be offered and the possibility to enable a consistent management of search engine optimisation across all areas of government responsibility.

Content is critical

Users appreciate websites that provide relevant information in a format that supports readability and that is clear and concise. In comparison over all provided services, a high-level consistency of quality content is what users are looking for. Delivery models which support the users by providing content of high quality and enable intuitive findability are going to outperform other models. The UK and the South Australia model delivered a consistent experience in terms of content at the right level of detail for their users, which was highly appreciated. The report also states that in order to control the content quality of the websites, the according group in charge needs to be “sufficiently resourced with appropriately skilled people”.

Users are unconcerned when linking to multiple sites

The next objective was to investigate the users’ awareness of pathways. While most users were at least peripherally aware, some users did not recognise when they were being taken to other websites, sometimes even when there were changes in the graphical layout of the websites. In the case of the Queensland Government websites they often did not notice, presumably due to the consistency of the layout which creates a consistent user experience. As an interesting finding, some users stated that they do not care about being taken from site to site – as long as they find the information they are searching for. A more critical factor for government sites are signs for credibility such as the domain-ending “.gov” in the address bar or specific government logos. Additionally, graphical guidance and orientation, e.g. through the use of so-called breadcrumbs (a navigation aid that shows the page’s location in the website hierarchy in a compact manner) - as used in the websites of South Australia - were perceived helpful. Although users are unconcerned with being linked to multiple websites, the franchise sites were ranked higher overall than the Queensland site, because the users found that the websites based on the franchise model were “easy to use” and “everything they needed was just there”.

Proportion of government information on franchises versus agency sites

The superior role of the UK model was also supported by the users’ comments that they liked “size and simplicity of the [UK] website”. The report suspects that the preference for the UK website goes back to the size and simplicity of the website and the proportion of content that has been migrated to the franchise site – compared to content that is still available on the different government department websites. More specifically, the franchise service delivery model does not provide the full scope of government services on the portal itself. For certain services, the user has to visit specific agency websites for their consumption. The MR company assumed that only 10% of all UK government information is migrated to the portal site. Based on the MR company’s experience, they suspect that the Pareto principle is applicable, which states that 80% of the users look for 20% of the content published on the website. Building on that statement, it is brought forward that only the most popular content should be centralised in a portal, but not more than 20%, and the long tail of the rest of the services should be kept on the departmental websites. The report assumes that there might be a “sweet spot” for the right proportion of content to be migrated. Whichever proportion is chosen, this should be closely and continuously monitored and adapted accordingly.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

In the following critical reflection, we will briefly revisit some of the findings of the report to offer additional considerations, particularly with regard to the potential role of service bundles in one-stop portals, an area that needs future research beyond the study presented in this paper in order to better evaluate the full potential of a franchised approach. Related to these considerations, we are going to discuss the role of the study in the context of a more comprehensive reform strategy towards transformative government.

With regard to the objective of understanding the relative strengths and weaknesses of the existing websites as perceived by users, the study has produced some interesting and important insights as summarised in the last section of this paper. However, no strong conclusions could be drawn. Although the report states that “Users are currently satisfied with the existing Queensland approach, but prefer franchise sites after frequent use”, it also comes to the conclusion “that there are no significant differences in overall user satisfaction ratings between each model” and that no single model appears to be more efficient and easier for users.

Yet, revisiting the outcomes of the preference assessment, it appears to be important to direct attention towards the switch in user preferences. The participants were twice asked to rank the existing websites in order of preference. For the first time, they had to make the assessment after they finished the user-generated tasks, i.e. the ones they had already performed before. The second assessment occurred after the users had finished the prescribed tasks. Table 3 below shows the preferred government websites of the participants at these two different stages.

Table 3: Preferred government websites before and after the prescribed tasks

	Queensland	South Australia	United Kingdom
Before the prescribed tasks	42%	47%	11%
After the prescribed tasks	28%	23%	49%

With regard to the first assessment, one has to keep in mind that the users re-created a ‘real-life’ task which they had already executed at the Queensland Government website before (within the last six months). This characteristic most likely explains the high preference rate at this stage for Queensland’s websites, particularly due to the users’ familiarity with this task on the website. It is more surprising that the South Australian government websites could position themselves at the top of the ranking. The fact that the government website of the United Kingdom was hardly mentioned as a first choice is likely to correlate with the participants’ familiarity with Australian government structures as also mentioned in the report. However, the change of preference in favour of the UK Government websites after the previously unknown prescribed tasks were performed was very strong and demands a closer look for explanation. The UK Government has the most comprehensive implementation of a franchised approach, whereas South Australia had only partially realised the approach when the study was done. Also, it should be noted again that after all tasks were performed, the current Queensland Government website was rated lowest (see Table 2), i.e. the satisfaction rates for franchise-based service delivery models outweighed the ratings for the traditional approach in each of the five categories user satisfaction were examined.

On a more general level, one might challenge the study’s ability to fully assess users’ preferences for the different service delivery models. The underlying question is, how would online service delivery of a government that uses franchises in the backend differ from one that does not and was the study suitable to capture that potential difference to the full extent? The report alludes to the potential benefits of the franchise approach by stating that the approach can be advantageous because of the “overall consistency of experience” that can be offered and the possibility to enable a consistent management of search engine optimisation across all areas of government responsibility. However, beyond that an important aspect would be that a franchised website is aimed at offering more citizen-centric service bundles (groupings of services) in the information architecture. For example, Kernaghan and Berardi (2001) distinguish three types of bundling, namely bundles based on life events, bundles based on demographics such as seniors or disabled people and bundles based on topics such as ‘tourism’ or ‘health’. These service bundles can be mapped to the franchise organisations in the virtual business layer of the government, i.e., each service bundle represents an aggregated offering of the services the corresponding user franchise organisation is responsible for. The main benefit of such service bundles is that they group services together which are related to specific needs or customer segments and typically would be consumed together or at least, by being presented together as a group, fulfil an important information function with regard to the offered portfolio of services that are related to that specific need.

Due to testing that was mainly based on unrelated prescribed tasks, the study could not fully appreciate the potential benefits of customer segment-specific or need-specific service bundles (franchises). Although government websites are often not browsed through on a very regular and frequent basis (in contrast to news or social networking portals) but are visited having a dedicated purpose in mind, namely to access a specific government service, the “cross-selling” of government services (and possibly even external services) based on their offering in topical service bundles could potentially be a very positive influencing factor on user satisfaction in the longer term relationship with the government. This effect could not be tested based on the design of the current study.

An approach leveraging the idea of service bundles to the maximum will also potentially have an impact on navigability, intuitiveness, ease of use and overall user experience. The report focuses strongly on the initial navigation pathway that brings users to the government website that offers the service the user is looking for. It stresses the importance of the “Google” search engine and derives from this insight recommendations with regard to search engine optimisation. However, it does not investigate the potential benefits of improving navigability etc. within the domain of government websites, facilitated by the service bundle concept. The main scenario described in the report is the one in which the user arrives at the government website on the exact page

of the specific service that was searched for. Still, it is desirable for the government to guarantee that users see more than only the service they searched for (cross-selling). By increasing customer awareness of the content offering over time cross-selling reduces customer effort and retains customers in the cost-effective online channel. Therefore, the government needs to provide other relevant links and related services as well as a straightforward navigation structure that does not confuse the customer. An approach based on service bundles can accomplish this requirement. Service bundles themselves can either consist of services with a high topic-originated relatedness or they might be useful in the environment of a specific life-event such as “getting married” (Wimmer 2002). What is of utmost importance is that instead of a strict alignment of services with specific government departments, as it is common in the traditional approach, it is the understandability and intuition for the customer that counts and is put into practise using the service bundle approach. Departments keep changing their names, and the franchise approach with corresponding service bundles at the front end frees citizens from the need to have detailed knowledge about the machinery of government. As the MR report already points out, one of the “pros” of the UK Government franchised approach is that “users do not need to know which department looks after their specific enquiry – the information is arranged according to topic, rather than department.” This development hints to a philosophical shift in government from agency-centric to customer-centric service delivery that service bundling exemplifies so well. Moving from department-structure to bundles is the first (and arguably largest) culture shift, and it paves the way for changing the focus to meeting customer needs and reducing customer effort.

From a bigger picture, it is important to note that the study discussed here is a usability study only. While it was conducted having the objective in mind to “gather a holistic view of what customers think of the proposed franchise model of online Government services”, it has to be stated very clearly that a usability study alone cannot probe the core of the franchise approach as proposed, e.g., by the OASIS Transformational Government Framework (TGF) (OASIS 2011). The reason for this lies in the much broader view that this proposed approach takes, as it “aims beyond purely technical aspects of better enabling e-government processes towards addressing the cultural and organisational barriers which have hindered public service benefits realisation.” By encompassing “a new ‘virtual’ business layer within government which allows an integrated, government-wide, citizen-focused service to be presented to citizens across all channels, but at no extra cost and without having to restructure government to do so”, it addresses not only the online channel of service delivery, but also all other channels such as call centres and over-the-counter services or other frontline public services in an integrated way. Thus, the online front-end is just one single element that might reflect changes based on the adoption of a franchise model, but most likely not the essential one. Here, tremendous further efforts are needed in order to realise the potential benefits. Still, Queensland can be optimistic as first, the Australian Government has identified the time being as “an era where the pace of change will accelerate through technology-enabled transformation of the business of government” (Australian Government Information Management Office 2006) and second, Australia and the UK are cited as two of the leaders of transformational government (OASIS 2010).

The “Franchise Marketplace” as the virtual business infrastructure within which “Customer Franchises” collaborate with each other and other stakeholders to deliver user-centric, trusted and interoperable content and transactions to citizens and businesses lies at the conceptual heart of the Transformational Government approach.

According to OASIS (OASIS 2011), the “Customer Franchises” as collaborative organisations created by the government serve purposes of “understanding the needs of a specific customer segment for government services (such as, for example, parents, motorists, disabled people, land and property); championing the needs of that segment within government; aggregating content and transactions for that segment across government and beyond; and delivering that content and services as part of the wider Franchise Marketplace” (OASIS 2011).

Due to the holistic nature of the approach, the journey towards a Transformational Government reform involves much more than just restructuring the online channel or implementing a one-stop portal. The Transformational Government Framework, which is currently in the process of being specified by a new OASIS Technical Committee that was launched in September 2010, for example will include a Transformational Government reference model, a series of policy documents necessary to implement the change, a value chain for citizen service transformation, a series of guiding principles, a business model for change, a best practice delivery roadmap and a checklist of critical success factors. Transformational Government is a far reaching organisational strategy to meet expectations “to deliver better and more services for less cost whilst maintaining high-level oversight and governance”.

Comparative usability testing as in the case of the study discussed in this paper can only be one element to support decision making processes in governments that consider embarking on a government transformation process leveraging the franchise service delivery model in its entirety. However, it should be noted that usability testing can be a good way to measure an organisation’s commitment to customer-centricity, which will be the key determining factor in the success of any service-delivery channel.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper presented the findings of a commissioned market research, which included a comparative assessment of three governmental web sites, of which two followed a franchise approach, by a representative sample of the Queensland public, and reflected on the observations made in that study. With regard to the objective of understanding the relative strengths and weaknesses of the existing websites as perceived by users, the study has produced some interesting and important insights. A critical reflection pointed out potential limitations of the study's design as it does not allow testing potential benefits of presenting service bundles (based on the organisational franchises in the background) to citizens and businesses. By prescribing individual tasks to be performed, the advantage of collocating services in bundles based on an analysis of citizen needs and expectations were not tested. Besides the limitations described in the critical reflections section, it has to be considered that implementation of the proposed service delivery model requires a high level of top management support. This is especially due to existing power structures within and between different government departments. Also, required implementation efforts might vary significantly depending on the complexity of the government structure, e.g. consider the United States federal government structures versus those of Hong Kong or Singapore as city states.

In terms of our practical contributions, the findings are of interest to all governments that are currently on the verge of considering the development of a one-stop portal as a part of their journey towards the next stage of e-government, i.e. transformational government, as currently drafted and proposed by OASIS. By positioning the study against the background of a comprehensive transformational government approach and discussing the potential benefits of service bundling, which maps to the idea of creating customer franchises but remained largely unconsidered in the study, the paper also makes an academic contribution and extends the existing body of knowledge with regard to service bundling and service portfolios in the public sector.

Future work needs to focus on conceptualising and validating quality models to assess the franchise approach since a model purely focussing on the front end can only provide limited insights into providing "a holistic view of what customers think of the proposed franchise model of online government services and identify any problems with various models." However, measuring the utility and usability of the service offerings will be critical in indicating the overall success of the online channel at the front end of the franchise approach. In turn, models need to be developed that provide the means to evaluate the quality of bundles and one-stop portals, both of which have only received limited attention by academia (e.g., Moraga et al. 2006). Having these models in place allows a fair comparison between the same units of analyses having a specific objective in focus. As pointed out in the related work, although several evaluation models in the government domain are available, their utility is limited for evaluating franchises, bundles, or one-stop portals, as their focus and scope is (slightly) different. Furthermore, approaches or methods that support governments in identifying services that should be bundled needs to be provided. Baida (2006) provided an approach based on ontologies to map consumer demand to existing services in order to identify suitable bundles. However, its applicability in the government sector is limited due to the impersonal relationship between service provider and consumer. Kohlborn et al. (2010a) provided a conceptual approach for identifying bundles, but its applicability in the public sector needs to be evaluated as well.

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