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Enabling e-Local Government: A Case Study of Seberang Perai Citizens towards ICTs

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Abstract

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Malaysian government anticipates in new agenda local government transformation to improve public access to its information and services and provide for greater involvement and participation in local decision-making. The study focused into ways and means of using ICTs to develop and improve public access to local authority services, and interaction between the local authority and its public, by taking Seberang Perai Municipality Council and its citizens as a case. The objectives were achieved through the use of questionnaire-based surveys, interviews and focus groups, with a total of 300 respondents. In the findings, there was a clear low level of negativity towards using ICTs to interact with the local authority and also reveals a high level of dissatisfaction by Seberang Perai citizens with their local authority. In future research, positive approach should be introduced to citizens to the use of the new information technologies presents the local authority with a platform on which to build its ICTs strategies by focus groups in wider access.

Introduction

The Malaysian Government has set out a modernization programme for local government which places strong emphasis on democratic renewal, improved public services and the achieving of 'best value'. The Government anticipates that by accepting this new agenda local government will be transformed. To make evident that these objectives are achieved, local government is expected to improve and increase public access to its information and services, and provide for greater involvement and participation in local decision-making by the public as individuals and as groups in the community

(Norris, 1978). At the same time they have to ensure that those who are traditionally socially excluded are brought into the fold to play their full part, and guarantee that local services are provided as efficiently and effectively as possible. Both local and central government are firmly aware that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have an essential role to play if the agenda set out above is to be accomplished effectively (Norris, 1980). The study initiated into ways and means of using ICTs to develop and improve public access to local authority services, and interaction between the local authority and its public, by taking

Seberang Perai Municipality Council and its Citizens as a case.

Methodology

The research is concerned with exploring public attitudes towards the use of ICTs in the provision of local services and in improving communication with the local authority. More precisely, the investigation seeks to ascertain; the views, opinions and attitudes of citizens and their relationships with their local authority, their methods of communication with the authority, and the sources of information used relating to public services (Phang, 1997). Next, the extent to which groups and citizens use computers, their attitude towards ICTs and the impediments preventing them from using the new technologies and citizens' expectations of the benefits to be gained from the use of ICTs.

The objectives were achieved through the use of questionnaire-based surveys, interviews and focus groups, with a total of 300 respondents. Throughout the research, emphasis was placed on obtaining the views of groups regarded as senior citizens (above 60s), those whose prospects, networks and chances exclude them from the rest of the community.

Findings

General Relationship Between Citizens And Their Council

A local authority's effectiveness in using ICTs to improve public access may well depend on the prevailing attitudes of citizens towards the new technologies and their perception of council-public relations. Hence the first part of the research attempted to evaluate the relationship between Seberang Perai citizens and their local authority based on public perception. The findings revealed a high level of dissatisfaction by Seberang Perai citizens with their local authority. There was a widespread perception that; services which should be provided as a whole, are often patchy and fragmented, and the local council lacks the organizational structures with which to deal effectively with the citizens.

Furthermore, citizens often have to visit several different departments or sections, before being satisfied about the service they require, thus feeling that they are being passed from 'pillar to post'. Organization of the local authority is geared to suiting the needs and interests of

officers rather than those of the public which they purport to serve and local government officers, the information providers of the local authority, often lack the necessary information with which to communicate to members of the public in an appropriate manner. The findings also found that some ethnic and minority groups are less favorably treated by their local authority when compared with other 'main stream' groups. This investigation also reveals that for many of the public, the local authority is perceived as a marginal source of information about the services they provide. There are many reasons for this, some of which do not necessarily reflect adversely on the Council. On the other hand, a reason for seeking information elsewhere may be frustration with council services since there were many complaints of difficulty of accessing information and uninterested local government officers.

Regarding this unfavorable perception of the local authority by the public, there may be some extenuating factors relating to the fact that; i) a large number of the groups surveyed were the senior citizens ones, which are naturally suspicious of the council and its staff, and ii) almost all findings on council-citizens relationship reveal that 'ordinary citizens demonstrated negative views of the council including its services, officers and councilors'. Nevertheless such perceptions provide a major challenge to the local authority in its attempt at democratic renewal and improved access.

There is healthy receptivity by citizens to the concept of using ICTs as a means of dealing with their local authority. The response appears even more notable when it is considered that many of the citizens involved were from senior citizens groups and that the investigation concerning the use of ICTs took place against a background of much dissatisfaction and cynicism on the part of the public towards the Council (Sanderson,2005). The local authority will derive re-assurance from relatively high number of Seberang Perai citizens using computers (over 55% of respondents use computers regularly), level of computer ownership and access in the home (nearly 50%) and level of computer skills amongst citizens (70% having average to high skills),

There was a clear low level of negativity towards using ICTs to interact with the local authority with only 11% of respondents having *no interest*

in computers and a further 5% agreeing that *computers could do nothing for them*. The research also found that; contrary to general notion, the over 60s are not afraid to 'have a go' with computers and are less intimidated in their use than are the 25-30 and 51-60 age groups. This is an increasing section of the population which is likely to be using local authority services as much as other sections or groups, thus getting senior citizens 'on line' must be a priority for the local authority if 'electronic government' is to be a reality. Importantly too, it was found that, in general, the various ethnic groups are positive about using ICTs. Even so, the ethnic Chinese groups were found to be significantly more 'up-beat' about the new technologies than the Malay population and ethnic Indian groups.

The Challenges

Despite this positive response to the use of ICTs we sound a note of caution. There are areas in Seberang Perai where, as a result of unemployment and other social disadvantages, disappointment and cynicism of the local authority run so deep as to make it unlikely that citizens from such areas will want to deal with their local council whether electronically or by other means. In addition it was found that, as a result of lack of confidence, finance, skills and time, women use computers less than men, perpetuating an important form of exclusion (Kamarudin Ngah, et.al, 2002). In both these cases, if the use of ICTs is to be effective as means of dealing with the council then these are challenges, which the local authority must meet.

- i) **Impediments To The Use Of ICTs**
Despite such favorable response to the use of ICTs, the investigation reveals some serious impediments to the public using the new technologies. These hindering factors relate to lack of access to ICTs (26%); lack of finance allocated to purchase computers, software and equipment (19%); lack of computer skills (16%), and lack of confidence (11%). However given the public's interest in using ICTs, these inhibiting factors can be overcome by combining free or inexpensive use of the technologies, suitably located and properly maintained and backed up by sensitive training programmes.

- ii) **The Public's Expectations From The Use of ICTs**
Public confidence in the use of ICTs in interacting with local government will only be achieved by demonstrating that the new technologies actually do improve services and access, and do not merely 'move the queue from the counter to the kiosk'. Different groups have different expectations of ICTs. In addition, those citizens with little experience of using the new technologies (and especially the Internet) tend to hold highly exaggerated expectations of the new technologies (Kamarudin Ngah, et.al, 2002). On the other hand, many of those who regularly use the technologies have been disappointed with the outcomes. Thus a major challenge for the local authority in its quest to extend the use of ICTs, is the management of such (conflicting) expectations.

About fifty-per cent of respondents thought that the major benefit to be gained from ICTs would be improved access to information by means of 24-hour service. At the same time face-to-face contact (on screen) was highly valued because;

(positively) of the acceptance of the traditional method of communicating with the local authority; and

(negatively) it provides a means of evaluating officers' attitude towards the individual as well as basis for recognizing an officer when blame needs to be apportioned.

This keen partiality for face-to-face contact alerts the local authority that it must seek out and use the appropriate channels of communication if access is to be improved. Some focus groups had wider and higher expectations. Women, for example, expected ICTs not only to provide improved services but also to 'enrich' their lives and 'empower' them. The extent to which the local authority fails to use the technologies to do this, the council will have failed them (IDeA, 2010). Much was expected from those who used the local authority web site only to be disenchanting by;

high cost of use and sometimes difficulty of access prompting fears of exclusions and calls for widespread use of the Internet if not free should at least be very low cost,

the widely held perception that the local authority web site was nothing more than electronic brochures and public relations posters. The criteria against which the local authority web site are judged are based not so much on what other local authorities do but on the World Wide web.

Observations and Policy Implications

The widespread criticisms of the local authority have to be taken on board by the Full Council of the local authority and must be seen as a major aspect of the modernization programme (Kamarudin Ngah, et.al, 2002). The introduction and implementation of ICTs in local government cannot be separated from such attitudes and will obviously impact on its effectiveness. This is not to suggest that it will be easy to attract the 'hard-to-reach' groups, but it is a challenge which will have to be faced in a corporate manner (Davey, 1993). Individual departments and sections can make a difference to specific service relationships but, if citizens' general perception and attitude to the council are to change, the local authority must embark on corporate strategies.

The very positive approach by citizens to the use of the new information technologies presents the local authority with a platform on which to build its ICTs strategies. There is, we think, a demand for extensive deployment of ICTs apparatus within the authority so as to provide a wider access which citizens want. It is perhaps, too much to expect that, given local government's financial situation, free use of ICTs will be provided. However, the least that should be done is to ensure an adequate provision for ICTs systems for public use, either free or at low cost (MHLG, 2007). Without such provisions, public access through the new technologies would be meaningless.

Training is essential for building skills and confidence in the use of ICTs. The infrastructure of support for such training exists within many of the communities. Such training must be sensitive to the needs of particular communities and groups. From the indication revealed to us,

training should be done by non-specialists in IT and preferably by people from the community. Different groups have different expectations of benefits from the widespread use of ICTs. Some citizens have an exaggerated expectation of benefits and are disappointed. Such expectations have to be managed if disenchantment is not to set in. The local authority needs to consult with its various communities and put in place council-wide policies following discussions. In managing these expectations the authorities need to take their citizens and communities with them.

Proper resourcing is a major key to unlocking the potential of ICTs in the community and in improving public access. For example, the development of the local authority web site is generally hampered by a lack of; i) resources (finance and personnel), ii) corporateness in terms of the Full Council's involvement with policies and priorities of the use of ICTs, and iii) interest and commitment by councilors in this area.

The three items are very much inter-connected. If senior local government officers and councilors do not show genuine interest in developments such as the Web, ICTs will not be regarded as a priority and as a result the necessary resources are less likely to be forthcoming (Greenhalgh and Worpole, 1995).

Resources and strategies raise issues of politics (Greenhalgh and Worpole, 1996). Developing public access through ICTs will demand that councilors grasp the importance of the potential of such technologies and give commitment and support. For ICTs to deliver the improved public access and the other objectives sought to meet the needs of contemporary local government, the political will, informational and technological awareness and genuine enthusiasm will have to come from the politicians. That policy has to be driven from the top (Kamarudin Ngah, et.al, 2002).

Strategies for Putting ICTs into Effect

The strategies to be used in taking the ICTs initiative forward will be dependent on circumstance inside and outside the local authority. However, we suggest that the local authority give consideration to the following strategies (Kamarudin Ngah, et.al, 2002):

Strategy One: Foster political support for ICTs at highest level within the Council

If the ICTs initiative is to succeed, senior politicians and government officers have to become involved and act as champions for the use of such technologies. Without such involvement and support the necessary drive and resources will not be forthcoming. It is vital that elected council members demonstrate the political will to support ICT initiatives. It will thus be necessary to expose the elected representatives to the political, social and economic benefits that the new technologies will bring to their citizens. One method of encouragement is to emphasize Central Government's insistence that ICTs be used to improve local services and increase public access (Marlow, 1987). Another is to offer additional opportunity to convince politicians of the need for ICTs through dissemination conferences, workshops and publications.

Strategy Two: A corporate strategic approach to ICTs

For the new technologies to be used effectively to improve service and access, the local authority must plan and develop ICTs strategies on a corporate basis. It is recognized that in some cases this would amount to change of culture for the local authority. Such changes are usually difficult and generally involve a lengthy process. Nevertheless a start has to be made. Involvement of councilors is needed not just as champions for the use of new technologies but to take responsibility for providing the technological vision of the authority as well as for folding such visions and policies into the overall strategies of the authority. Hence it is vital that senior politicians in particular obtain the appropriate training and advice necessary to make them aware of the potential of ICTs for improved services and public access.

Information officers as well as other officers have an important role to play in providing this advice, information, and training that councilors need. As the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM) argues, making the 'Information Society' work is not a technical but a management challenges (Kamarudin Ngah, et.al, 2002)..

Strategy Three: Create appropriate infrastructure for purpose of distributing, managing, and monitoring ICTs usage amid the community

This key strategy may be implemented by establishing formal networks of 'field agents', whose primary responsibility will be, with support of the Council, to launch, manage and monitor ICTs initiatives within the community. It is essential that 'field agents' enjoy the full confidence and support of the community in which they work, have the necessary training and resources to successfully accomplish their goals, are effective communicators, possess relevant language skills and are empathetic to the cultural and social issues important to their community. These personal attributes are especially important if 'field agents' are successfully to encourage citizens to take up opportunities offered by ICTs.

Strategy Four: Prudently manage citizens' expectations of ICTs

The local council will have to give serious consideration to managing the expectations of ICTs of various groups and interests if disillusionment is not to set in. A major problem for the local authority is that citizens are either oblivious or indifferent to the fact that private and public sector organizations are profoundly different in terms of resource base, political accountability and social obligations. In addition some citizens share the naïve conviction that ICTs will be a panacea for overcoming all ills related to their relationship with local government (Yaakup, 2003). Hence, the council has to be careful about claims they make for ICTs and public access. It is better that the claims and promises for ICTs be more restrained than to disappoint an expectant public.

Strategy Five: Induce all Council departments to use ICTs in their policies

Notwithstanding the corporate strategic approach advocated in Strategy Two above, council departments should be encouraged to use ICTs in their policies and operational programmes. Although many of the council's departments use ICTs for formulating, administering and implementing policies, the potential for extending the application of the new technologies, especially on-line facilities, is not fully realized in others. Accordingly, the internal promotion of ICTs should be undertaken as part of the programme for implementing the new technologies (Kloot, 2000). In addition, moves towards using ICTs in the council could be boosted if support came from the highest level of

authority as suggested in Strategies One and Two above.

Conclusion

Local and central government are firmly aware that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have an essential role to play if the agenda set out above is to be accomplished effectively. The study initiated into ways and means of using ICTs to develop and improve public access to local authority services, and interaction between the local authority and its public. A local authority's effectiveness in using ICTs to improve public access may well depend on the prevailing attitudes of citizens towards the new technologies and their perception of council-public relations due to low level of ICTs used among public in Seberang Perai Council. This keen partiality for face-to-face contact alerts the local authority that it must seek out and use the appropriate channels of communication if access is to be improved. Some focus groups had wider and higher expectations in order to increase the quality of information given to local people.

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