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Governments Put the Internet to Work, but Important Challenges Remain

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Governments across the country, including local governments and state agencies in Georgia, are increasingly offering services and communicating with citizens and constituents through electronic or E-government systems. However, little is known about these evolving electronic systems and exactly how they are being used. Supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation, the Vinson Institute recently conducted a national survey of local, state, and federal public managers about key Internet policies, programs, and technologies (O'Looney forthcoming). Public managers were asked for their views on five major Internet development issues: the current level of their government's Internet service delivery, the need for Internet privacy protections, the importance of creating personalized services and information, the development of appropriate mechanisms for online public dialogue, and policy and management approaches to the information overload that results from public participation in the rule-making process via the Internet.

Concerning current capacity, respondents were asked whether their government had Internet-based capabilities such as departmental websites, E-commerce, or audio/video access to governmental deliberations. As the table shows, most jurisdictions (95 percent) now have websites and nearly two-thirds have websites with searchable databases. However, only a small number employ more advanced technologies to offer E-commerce, online discussions among citizens and decision makers, or accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Managing personal identity with respect for personal privacy is a fundamental issue in advanced uses of Web services such as E-commerce and Web personalization or customization. Because of their role in protecting privacy, public managers were asked to rate the importance of different types of safeguards such as privacy notification, opt-in and opt-out policies of providing personal information, technology security, and the ability of citizens to customize their privacy profiles. Overall, public managers strongly supported all of the privacy protection mechanisms, indicating the strongest support for security technology and the weakest (but still strong) for citizen customization.

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One goal of the study was to gauge how personalization technologies might develop in the public sector. Generally, the level of support for personalization varies by functional area (e.g., planning and zoning, recreation), by type of public records used to develop personal profiles (e.g., property ownership, library membership records), and by the type of problems or barriers likely to be encountered during implementation (e.g., technical, policy, or administrative issues). Public managers were especially concerned about public websites having links to and incorporating information from external resources, including private-sector websites, political or interest group websites, and information provided by other governments. They were particularly averse to incorporating advertising into governmental websites.

Current Capabilities of Respondents' Governments

Capability	Percent
Department has website	95
Website	
— Has searchable databases	63
— Employs E-commerce	9
— Facilitates citizen-to-citizen discussion	4
— Allows citizens to interact with decision makers during deliberations	8
— Has audio or video of decision-making deliberations	7



Public managers' opinions of the appropriate characteristics of online forums for citizen discussion were diverse. In general, respondents expressed mild support for such forums about policy issues. They were skeptical of online forums about elections and of the idea of governments automatically accommodating citizen requests for new forum topics.

As more governmental organizations invite online citizen-to-government communication, such as public comment on administrative rule making, the ability of public managers to carry out their duties can be severely affected. Managers who have invited such communication have found themselves inundated with more information than existing staff can process. Respondents were asked to rate the viability of various options for addressing the information overload problem. Options such as providing citizens with a "one-click" ditto mechanism for indicating agreement with an existing citizen comment were given the strongest support. Charging citizens a transaction fee or having citizens validate each other's comments were least supported.

Successful websites provide a broad range of services that support multiple online electronic communities and citizens' interests; meet citizens' needs for transactions, civic participation, service, and convenience; incorporate related knowledge; and allow users to perform a wide range of functions (Armstrong and Hagel 1996; Werbach 2000). Survey findings suggest that many public-sector organizations are still far from being able to provide this range and depth of services. Whether public managers play a facilitative role in implementing successful Internet strategies will likely depend on their view of the key issues identified in the study. Clearly, the future of the public Internet will involve substantial technical capacity building (e.g., supporting financial transactions or online audio/video for citizens with disabilities), but the study also suggests that governments must clarify their Internet policies and program directions so that citizens will know what to expect from E-services.

While our research suggests that public managers generally support strong privacy protections, other research indicates slow adoption of such protections (West 2001). Clearly, support for personalization varies by functional area, and governments may need to develop appropriate criteria for deciding which services to personalize.

New criteria are also needed for deciding what personal data and external information should be available on a public-sector website. Public managers regard many of the external sources of information with some skepticism, suggesting a need for public policy debate on when it is appropriate for governments to act as a portal to external information.

Finally, the study suggests that establishing a good balance of citizen-versus-government control over the personalization process and finding viable mechanisms for addressing the information overload problem are two of the critical Internet challenges confronting government officials.

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The national survey included chief administrative and elected officials in cities and counties with populations above 50,000 and public managers in state and federal government agencies who subscribed to *Government Technology* magazine. In total, approximately 425 potential respondents were chosen at random, with a response rate of 26 percent.

Selected Resources

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