

A close-up photograph of a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. In their left hand, they are holding a white credit card. The background is a solid orange color. A diagonal grey bar runs from the top left to the bottom right, partially obscuring the keyboard and the credit card. The CSC logo is in the top left corner.

CSC

CLIENT CENTRIC GOVERNMENT

A CSC POINT OF VIEW

CLIENT CENTRIC GOVERNMENT: ENSURING THE BUREAUCRACY WORKS TO THE BENEFIT OF THE COMMUNITY



RIGHTLY OR WRONGLY, LOCAL MOTOR VEHICLE DEPARTMENTS IN THE US ARE OFTEN SEEN AS A MICROCOSM OF THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF GOVERNMENT SERVICE. SEEN AS HIGHLY BUREAUCRATIC, TIME CONSUMING, AND OFFERING LITTLE VALUE, THE PUBLIC INTERACTS WITH THE DEPARTMENTS, NOT AS A MATTER OF CHOICE BUT AS A MATTER OF NECESSITY. BUT DOES GOVERNMENT SERVICE NEED TO BE THAT WAY?

One of the interesting aspects of working with Australian government agencies, is that unlike in the commercial sector, everyone that you interact with is also client of their ultimate employer; we are all recipients of government services. Given the breadth of services delivered, most individuals can relate to a difficult experience interacting with a government department. Having spent some time in the United States, I gained first-hand experience with some of these challenges. After spending half of a tedious day at the Motor Vehicle Department (MVD) to procure a driver license, I certainly didn't feel that the department held client service as a significant priority. However, I was surprised to find their innovative solution to limiting their number of client interactions; once issued, my driver license was valid for 42 years!

While this was an interesting approach to the problem, it skirts around the policy issues associated with such a distant expiry date. Issues like - will I still be fit to drive in 42 years? But the true issue lies in an administrative process that is so burdensome that they have taken steps to make sure that, for most people, this is a once or twice in a lifetime experience. Wouldn't it be better to make the process less painful, so that people are prepared to endure it more readily?

This discussion centres on the challenges involved in delivering client centric government, exploring smart ways to make interacting with government easier and more palatable for the community.

THE CHALLENGE OF CLIENT CENTRIC GOVERNMENT

Of late, the term bureaucracy has developed a negative connotation. This hasn't always been the case as authors David Osborne and Ted Gaebler note: "It is hard to imagine today, but a hundred years ago bureaucracy meant something positive. It connoted a rational, efficient method of organisation - something to take the place of the arbitrary exercise of power by authoritarian regimes. Bureaucracy brought the same logic to government work that the assembly line brought to the factory. With the hierarchical authority and functional specialisation, they made possible the efficient undertaking of large complex tasks."¹

Today's challenge is to utilise the positive aspects of bureaucracy: organisation of large complex undertakings, consistency of process, and impartiality in decision making, while minimising the negative: complication of procedures, inflexibility to change, and susceptibility to become self-serving or corrupt. Clearly this is a complex challenge. It requires the development of public policy that includes clearly articulated objectives, as well as definite standards for measuring progress. If this can be achieved, history has shown that bureaucracy is an effective tool for delivering value to the community.

Indeed, identifying the policy objectives and how they will be judged is critical to ensure that the bureaucracy serves the public rather than its own interests. Left unchecked,

bureaucracy can quickly consume the resources allocated to enacting policy, without the outcome reaching the community. By including a requirement to measure and publish results, along with clear and precise measurement criteria, the incentive to deliver the desired result is enhanced. These activities focus policy makers, and the public service, on providing quality outcomes to the public.

Inevitably, some policy objectives will not be achieved. Regular service metric reports, published internally and to the public, enhance government accountability by providing a true benchmark of performance and highlighting the effects of funding. This can be a daunting prospect for both policy makers and the agencies that enact them. Measuring, and more significantly, reporting on results, forces both parties to accept responsibility for outcomes and opens the government to scrutiny. Ultimately, it is this scrutiny, and the transparency that enables it, that allows policy and public process to be adjusted and deliver better outcomes in the future.

IMPROVING CLIENT SERVICE

This aspect of client centric government enables the delivery of improved community outcomes from limited public resources. By itself, improved accountability does not address the community's expectation of quality service alongside efficient delivery. Ensuring that the community receives

consistent quality service is challenging; the breadth of services offered, combined with the sheer number of stakeholders to satisfy, means that there will always be room for improvement. However, there are ways to facilitate positive interaction between government and the community. Let's start with a few principles:

- Ensure consistent decisions - there are few ways to damage credibility more quickly than decisions that are viewed to be arbitrary, subjective, or lacking factual basis. Have you ever called a contact centre and received a response you didn't like, only to call again to "shop" for an agent who would provide the response you were seeking? Lack of consistent decisions leads to behaviour that is costly, counterproductive and erodes public confidence.
- Respect the public's time - too often the public perceives that timely service isn't a priority in a system that is convoluted and opaque. Through the reuse of existing client information (eg. don't ask a client to complete the same information on multiple forms) and limiting the number of processes that require face-to-face interaction, information can be submitted efficiently and in a manner that is convenient to the community.
- Let the client pick the method of interaction - it is increasingly important to provide service through a variety of channels, as the method that is convenient for one segment of the community may not be for the next. Clients can be directed towards low cost channels by offering compelling value through those channels. Attempting to shift clients to an email channel may have limited success if the average response time for an email request is not on par with the instant gratification offered through the voice channel. In contrast, many clients will choose self-service if they feel that it provides them with some insight or control over the process.

- Be transparent - let the client know where they stand. Nothing is more frustrating than submitting a request for service without a means of determining when your request might be resolved.

TECHNOLOGY AS AN ENABLER

While beneficial, these principles alone will not enable quality client service. Public servants are the face of the government to the community, and it is only by supplying them with the necessary tools that they can serve the public effectively. Increasingly, information technology (IT) provides this capability. Either by automating routine processes or providing the public with the capability to perform self-service, IT systems can reduce workload and free staff to focus on higher value tasks, including improved service.

Utilising my experience with the MVD, let's explore a vision of how information technology can enable our client centric government principles and lead to an improved client experience.

Today: You discover your driver's licence has expired after a routine traffic stop, and search your schedule for a time to visit the MVD during business hours.

On arrival at the MVD you find a large queue, so you take a ticket and spend several hours listening to your iPod while waiting for your turn at the counter. When you finally get to the counter, you have to help the officer complete forms, join another queue for an eye test, then finally have your photograph taken. Some time later, you escape the office - vowing not to return any time soon!

Future: As your driver license approaches expiration, you receive an email at the address provided when you last registered. The email contains a smart-form, pre-populated with most recent client information that the department has on file. You then complete the smart-form, confirming the pre-populated information, updating any details that have changed, and entering any new information required to process a request for your license extension.

This demonstrates the use of a Customer Relationship Management system to deliver proactive notification of routine events. Any number of client interactions occur on a regular basis, from meetings with social workers to renewing licenses or visas. These are more likely to occur on schedule if you send clients a reminder. Utilising the information that clients provide, these reminders can be delivered cheaply and easily using automated email or SMS.

You have a question regarding whether your use of non-prescription reading glasses requires you to indicate that you use corrective lenses. Fortunately, the smart-form contains a hyperlink to the department webpage for frequently asked questions (FAQ). After reviewing the web content, you still haven't determined whether your reading glasses qualify as corrective lenses, so you click the "request online chat" link on the FAQ page. A client service agent then responds to your request and answers the question through the online chat channel.

This demonstrates the use of an online portal to shift interactions from expensive telephone or face-to-face interactions, to lower cost channels.

You complete the smart-form, digitally sign the document, and click the submit button. The smart-form information is saved to your computer and transmitted over the National Broadband Network (NBN) to the MVD, which electronically processes the form and updates their records. The smart-form notifies you that your request has been lodged and provides you with an indication of the expected processing timeframe. It states that the department aims to process all requests within five business days, however eighty percent of requests are resolved within forty eight hours. Further, because you indicated that you wish to establish an online account and supplied a password within the eform, you can check the status of your request via the website at any time.

This demonstrates a practical application of smart-forms. Electronic forms work well in standardised processes, reducing the cost and effort required to process requests.

1. Osborne, David and Gaebler, Ted. Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector. Plume. February, 1993.



They offer the ability to pre-populate known client information, saving the public time, while leading to more consistent data capture through built in data validation. Submission could be sent through the National Broadband Network, reducing the need for a client to visit a local office or postal expense.

Further, because the data capture in smart-forms is electronic, processing submissions can be automated, eliminating several process steps such as transposing paper records to electronic form, error prone scanning techniques, and storage of original documents. The security of smart-forms is enhanced by the use of digital signatures as part of a secure encryption process to ensure that your data is sent by you - reducing the potential for identity theft.

The example also demonstrates effective notification of service level statistics. Providing clients with service level information improves their confidence in choosing self-service channels. Clients are likely to eschew self-service for face-to-face or telephone interactions when they have questions about a process or timeframe. By providing information on how their request will be processed, along with relevant service level statistics, clients will understand what to expect without the need to call before or after their request is lodged. Coupled with the ability to monitor the status of their request, a significant volume of common interactions can be eliminated.

The next day, you decide that you would like to verify if your new driver license is ready for collection. You log onto your account and review your pending requests. You find that your request has been processed, your account details updated, and your request is now in the "Verification of Residency" stage. While on the website, you also see a banner notice alerting you to the benefits of electing to be an organ donor. Following the link, you find an online form that allows you to register for the program.

This demonstrates one of the many aspects of self-service that can be enabled through client facing portals. By providing the client with the means to monitor their request, the client is less likely to call the department to check the status of their request; a costly transaction. Engaging with the public through the portal also allows agencies to issue public announcements or advertise services. This

is a more environmentally friendly approach to getting the message out than including inserts in public mailings.

Later that afternoon, you receive an email from the department notifying you that your request for driver license extension has been approved. It indicates that, for security reasons, you will need to visit the service centre and present identification in order to pick up your license. Further, because of your use corrective lenses, you will need to submit to an optical examination. To avoid a lengthy wait time, the department recommends that you schedule an appointment for the exam. The email offers three appointments during department slow periods, with the option to log onto your account and select an alternate time. You select one of the recommended appointment slots, and turn up at the MVD as scheduled. Upon arrival, you find that there is a priority queue for those that have registered an appointment.

This demonstrates the use of technology to automate scheduling and smooth out peaks in client demand. This allows agencies to rationalise staffing levels while reducing wait times for the public.

You quickly undertake the optical exam and your new license is printed. In order to release your license, you are asked to provide your credentials as a fraud avoidance measure. As the email indicated, you are offered two options, present the standard 100 points of identification or your government issued biometric token (such as an ePassport). After displaying your identification, your license is issued. Your next interactions with the department come after a move when you update your online account with a new address, and later when you receive an email from the department to alert you that your license expiration date is again approaching.

This demonstrates better use of Identity and Information Management by reusing information gathered by other departments using strong processes to ensure the protection of your identity data. Finally, easier interactions with agencies make it more likely that people will make the effort to keep their information up to date. For the majority of the public, it is far easier to submit an online form than risk a long queue to get a sticker on the back of their licence with a new address.

REALISING THE VISION

It is perhaps ironic to note that the future vision I have presented is actually achievable today, with current technology. So the question becomes, "Why aren't our government agencies doing more to deliver services to us like this?"

The answer is that systems of this nature require a measure of initial investment, with the cost savings realised over time. We all know that government funding is limited and constrained by a wide range of required outcomes, not all of which are as easily measured as client service processes. Indeed, there are pockets of excellence, but these services are in the minority.

The current environment is one where Government agencies are under intense pressure to realise cost savings while achieving greater efficiencies. Typically, the reaction of agencies under pressure is to downsize or cut services, but by using IT services to provide quality client interaction, the public will migrate to lower cost channels. Most agencies already have access to the building blocks necessary to achieve this outcome - all that is required is a commitment to client centric government and the political will to arrange the blocks into a more efficient construct.

To find out more about how CSC could help your organisation, please speak to your account manager or visit csc.com.au

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