



Digital Britain and new opportunities for effective participation

Briefing Paper

January 2009

On behalf of The Consultation Institute,
Programme & Research Unit,
21A High Street, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 1AG
Tel: 01767 689600

Contents

Context	1
The drivers	5
Where are we now?	5
The Challenges	7
Small steps for success	7
Rationale for training investment	9
Conclusions	10

Context

Within the last decade Britain has witnessed an IT revolution. From the digital switchover of television to the powerful array of information now at our fingertips, electronic means are changing the way we interact and facilitate change.

Public service innovation is essential to the UK's ability to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21st century. This applies in all areas, from education to law, health and transport.

The statistics speak for themselves: Around 65% of households have access to the Internet (mainly broadband connections) and 84% of adults have a mobile phone. Technology is also converging. For example, about one in ten people use their mobile phone to access the Internet.

In parallel, the time spent using a computer has grown significantly - to an average of 24 minutes per person per day with 69% of internet users now getting a 'daily dose' of the web.

The private sector was quick to harness the economic benefits of the IT boom and has created a set of high-level digital aspirations. Rightfully, the public sector has also responded with the supply of new online services, typically by replicating old ones.

But 'going digital' has had a more sizeable impact on the public bodies as the changes are applicable at the heart of organisational values. For example: governance, argument, polling, representation and opinion gathering.

Inadvertently, improved ICT has also opened the floodgates for increased citizen contact, criticism and scrutiny. It has empowered activists and grass-root campaigners and created its own set of administrative burdens.

The public sector has adapted by moving onward from eAdministration efforts to innovation in the participative aspects of business. Bolstered by heavy investment and experimentation (such as the 'ODPM national projects'), it now leads the private sector in many areas of online engagement - such as consensus building.

Electronic participation (eParticipation) is the term used to refer to this trend of ICT-supported governance and is usually associated with the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making. There is ample evidence of eParticipation in new government policy. For example, it is implicated in the forthcoming duty to involve, local democracy bill, policing green paper and modernising healthcare agenda.

The Institute has followed the progress of eGovernment over the last couple of years through its 'Technologies for Participation' seminars. But it recognises that running awareness seminars for consultation professionals is only part of a much wider agenda of **skills building and deployment** which most public agencies now need to consider.

This Briefing paper is meant to act as a thought-starter for those who are interested in the progress, problems and possibilities of technologies for participation.

Comments on this paper will be welcome; please address them to Rhion Jones, Programme Director of The Consultation Institute, at rhion@consultationinstitute.org or Fraser Henderson, CI associate at fraser.henderson@btinternet.com

The drivers

The principal driver is the growth in demand, assisted by the decreasing cost of technology and a 'mainstreaming' by generations who have never been without basic communication technologies such as email.

There has also been a slow but steady shift from top-down; the culmination of activities at the highest level has established eParticipation as 'good practice'. Foremost, the Council of Europe has recently recommended the adoption of multiple eDemocracy measures in its draft recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to European member states.

Political enthusiasm has also accelerated. Within the last year, Barack Obama set new standards for online campaigning and the European Parliament has spent millions of Euros on pilots under its 'eParticipation preparatory action'. Closer to home, Westminster is currently implementing an ePetitioning service and MPs have taken to writing blogs and 'twittering'.

At a national level, government departments are finally practicing what they preach - using eParticipation tools for business as usual. Recent examples include the London Parks vote (www.london.gov.uk/parksvote), orchestrated by the new Mayor of London. DIUS, meanwhile, have used an interactive policymaking tool during the consultation on the new 'innovation white paper'.

Evolution aside, the individual and organisational benefits of eParticipation are highly desirable. In theory, eParticipation offers more opportunities to get involved and allows for a greater and more diverse range of participants. Even better, it has the potential to offer *higher quality* engagement.

So why do eParticipation efforts have a history of disappointing outcomes? There is no straightforward answer - but we are certain that a number of failures could have been avoided with better planning. For example, choosing a highly salient issue and using digital marketing approaches can vastly increase participation rates.

Where are we now?

General participation statistics are not encouraging. Interest in politics has fallen by 3% over the past year and just fifteen per cent of the population have presented their views to a local elected representative in the same period.

A recent audit of political engagement in the UK estimates that of the 14% of people who are willing to take part in government consultation, only 4% actually participate. To top things off, only 39% of people polled think they actually get listened-to.

CLG's 2008 Citizenship Survey established that only 10% of the population are involved in citizen governance, defined as 'being a member of a group making decisions on local services and policy'. It is argued that this is one reason for low voter turn-out – for example; in the 2005 UK general elections only 37% of 18-24yr olds voted (the overall turnout was 61%).

Online participation with government is no better. The most frequently undertaken activity is signing a petition – a quarter of Internet users (25%) have done this offline and 7% have used the Internet to do this. Only 2% of British Internet users have contacted a politician online.

Skills are partly to blame. 22% of Internet users are only comfortable with basic tasks such as seeking information, email and shopping. However, the majority (67%) of Internet users have skills which allow them to engage with some sort of participatory activity. This might include government services, online financial services and low-level networking applications like mailing lists and discussion boards.

But only 11% have the right skill for *active* civic participation such as signing petitions, and joining social networking applications like Facebook.

However, these depressing statistics must be weighed against the volume and diversity which is represented. For example, while only a third of retired people are online (in comparison to 97% of students), those who *are* online *are* more likely than students or employed users to be civically engaged. 16% of retired users have signed a petition online compared to 7% of employed users and 5% of students.

Equally, despite less than one fifth of British Internet users maintaining a social networking profile or presence on the Internet, Facebook has more than 67 million active users. There is also a lot of potential for tapping into the mainstream – consider that nearly a third of British internet users watch video clips and webcasts online.

Growth is also phenomenal. There has been an average of 250,000 new registrations per day to Facebook over the last couple of years. Although initially associated with US college students, more than half of Facebook users are outside college and the fastest growing demographic are those of voting age and over.

The challenges

Despite predictions of rising engagement with ICT there are still tens of millions of people in the UK that don't use computers and the internet.

Online government initiatives are failing to reach the most excluded and the potential for the Internet to address social isolation and economic disadvantage remains largely untapped. Yet access quality, locations of access and attitudes towards technologies remain important barriers and enablers that government and partner bodies can influence.

Softer issues such as trust, identification, privacy and security are emerging as fresh concerns. This is compounded by the fast pace at which new technologies are introduced. For example, the future roll-out of a nationwide 'super-fast' broadband infrastructure has the potential to create a two-tier adoption divide.

It follows that secondary measures are now needed, demonstrated by the governments' intervention with the recent action plan on digital inclusion.

A mix of ingredients such as the balance of online versus online provision, design and accessibility of online methods, skills capability and choice of technologies are therefore necessary to achieve effective eParticipation strategies.

Small steps for success

There are numerous and complex choices when it comes to implementation. In particular, localised conditions and target audience bear influence over selecting the most appropriate tool or techniques.

For example, instant messaging is more popular than email amongst children and men are more likely to create an online profile than women. Likewise, boys aged 8-11 are twice as likely to use the internet every day as girls of the same age.

Simple measures such as developing a consultation database or ensuring that there is a ladder of increasing participation between transactional services and consultations are easily overlooked.

Key quality criteria that can be used for evaluating tools in a typical selection process are provided below:-

- Social acceptability
- Security and authentication
- Safeguards (e.g. for valid results)
- Relevance and legitimacy
- Usefulness
- Accessibility
- Appeal and stickiness
- Content clarity
- Responsiveness
- Usability / Intuitiveness
- Interoperability
- Error recovery
- Support and upgradeability
- Efficiency and flexibility
- Syndication

The Rationale for Training investment

This is not an exclusive list, but here are ten reasons why the investment is necessary; Institute members and others may find this list useful in preparing a Business Case for increased training in this area.

Reasons for effective eParticipation training

- ❑ Technology is so tightly woven into the fabric of society that ICT deprivation can rightly be considered alongside, and strongly linked to, more traditional twentieth century social deprivations. **Public bodies need to take action to prevent a widening digital divide and take steps to guarantee accessible electronic content**
- ❑ Too many of those who implement digital methods **do not fully understand the limitations, risks and issues associated with the choice of available solutions** which leads to disappointment or worse, systematic failures
- ❑ Stakeholders will need to address the reforms proposed in the new Local Democracy Bill **such as implementing electronic petitions and promoting democracy.**
- ❑ eParticipation **solutions will assist with performance targets**, such as CAA which will address citizen and community empowerment.
- ❑ The **Gershon agenda** is about efficiency and effectiveness. Going digital can transform existing exercises such as participatory budgeting and reduce effort in meeting mandatory outcomes such as the 'duty to involve'
- ❑ **eParticipation supports good communication**, such as the use of blogs and webcasts – learn how simple techniques and the use of existing channels, such as social networks, can be leveraged for getting messages across
- ❑ **Public bodies can improve consultation** by attracting a greater range of participants and providing more opportunities to engage
- ❑ **Citizens' trust and satisfaction can be improved** through intelligent targeting, rapid response and improved transparency and tracking.
- ❑ **Connected communities will benefit** from better trade, fundraising and campaigning opportunities
- ❑ **Stakeholders** need to identify the strategies, support and equipment required to fully engage online

Conclusion

The natural acceleration in citizen expectation, coupled with the expanding benefits of new technology mean that it is virtually impossible to avoid interacting on the digital channel.

Technology has demonstrated how it can complement the growing need for smarter and more collaborative participation, such as cross-sector working and more representative consultation. This holds true for internally and externally facing ventures.

Digital Britain offers new and exciting opportunities for citizen communication, engagement and empowerment. Despite the many and varied benefits we have also experienced a new set of problems, particularly public trust in new methods.

An increasing number of public bodies and their workforce (particularly in local government) are faced with mandatory requirements around the use of ICT, mainly around re-engaging decisions and decision makers with service users'.

The ability to strike the right balance of digital provision and achieving better services with fewer resources is no mean feat. The ability to stay ahead of the curve, particularly in terms of the rapidly evolving good practice, will be invaluable.

The challenge is therefore for Councils – and for other public bodies – to find a way to invest proportionately in the adoption of new tools and training programmes which support the successful deployment of digital initiatives.