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Summary

Proponents of e-Government tout it as a tool to increase transparency and decrease corruption. However, e-governments cannot achieve this without incorporating appropriate channels for public feedback. Public feedback mechanisms (PFMs) are a subset of two-way interactions between citizens/businesses and governments that are channeled to a direct point of contact, and are both internally and externally traceable. The idea is that government officials are held accountable for the information and services that they provide.

PFMs fall into two broad categories. They are either separate portals to file complaints and grievances or are integrated with a government service delivered online. Citizens and businesses should know who to contact, approximately how long they should wait for a response, and be able to track the progress. Otherwise, just because a citizen files a complaint or uses a service does not mean that the government official will necessarily respond to it.

Implementing a PFM requires a combination of technological support, clearly defined policies, and focal points that are held accountable. PFMs tied to a government service are more straight forward to implement because they require coordination with only one or two agencies. Separate portals to file grievances are more complex to implement because they require greater coordination between the different ministries. In either case, efforts to launch PFMs will need both technology and political will to push forth a certain degree of institutional reform. The benefits of such an endeavor however, should not be underestimated. Public Feedback Mechanisms lend to greater transparency and accountability, which naturally translate into a more well-run and trusted government.

When do two-way interactions take place in e-Government initiatives?

Most governments realize the potential for e-government initiatives to disseminate information, improve service delivery, increase transparency, decrease corruption, and widen democratic participation. e-Government initiatives can be categorized as internal, which are government to government (G2G) and government to employee (G2E), or external, which are government to business (G2B) and government to citizen (G2C). e-Government transforms the governments' external relationships, whether G2B or G2C, by enabling citizens to directly receive government services from anywhere in the world without making personal visits or going through bureaucratic procedures. Interactions with the government can either be one-way, from government to citizen/business, or two-way, which allows citizen/business to communicate to government. See figure 1.

Most e-government initiatives that deal with external relations begin with a web presence and evolve into a platform for transactions of government services to take place. Two-way interactions between the citizen/business and government can actually occur from the very beginning with a mere web presence. For example, a website that publishes government policies on registering a business can contain the email or other contact information of the civil servant in charge. This enables the citizen to initiate a two-way interaction by emailing or calling the person. Online government transactions of course, are two-way interactions where the government first offers the service, the citizen provides relevant information, and the government completes the service.
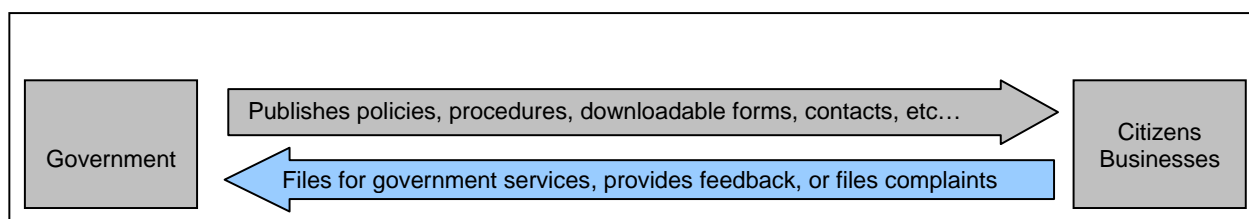
Figure 1

What is considered a "public feedback mechanism"?

A public feedback mechanism (PFM) is a subset of two-way interactions that hold governments accountable for how they respond to their citizens. It should satisfy the following criteria:

1 Information is directly routed to the relevant party and not to a vague point of contact such as the webmaster.
2 Information can be internally tracked so the recipient of feedback is held accountable for processing it.
3 Information can be externally tracked so the feedback provider can follow-up on his/her inquiry.

In other words, the citizen should feel that the information, feedback, or complaint sent to the government is actually processed and can be traced. Because the interactions are traceable, public feedback mechanisms are the key to increase transparency in e-government initiatives. It unleashes e-government's true potential to change the way governments interact with citizens and businesses by giving anyone, regardless of race, class, religion, or gender, the opportunity to interact directly with government officials. It is an important tool, among others, to ensure that government officials are there to actually serve the people.

How are public feedback mechanisms implemented?

A government can implement PFMs either as part of a government service or as a separate portal to direct citizen's complaints to relevant government ministries. PFMs built into a government service means that when citizens use a service such as vehicle registration, they are provided with a direct point of contact if they have further questions and are given an ID number to track the progress. PFMs that are separate portals allow citizens to submit complaints of any public service. The portal then directs the feedback to relevant ministries. Likewise, the citizen is given an ID number to track the progress. In either case, when a civil servant receives information from the citizen, s/he needs to know who to direct the information to and how to process it. This requires focal points from different ministries, clearly defined policies on how to address the information, and internal accountability.

Seoul's OPEN Anticorruption Project and Singapore's Feedback Unit illustrate each of these scenarios.

e-Government Initiative	PFM with Government Service	PFM through Separate Portal
	OPEN: Seoul's Anticorruption Project (Korea)[1]	Singapore's Feedback Unit[2]
Description	To target corruption, the Municipal Government of Seoul launched the OPEN system (Online Procedures ENhancement for Civil Applications) in 1998, an Internet portal that hosts 26 categories of civil applications.	Singapore established a Feedback Unit in 1985. The Unit actively holds forums, dialogue sessions, and publications. In 1997, they launched their website and linked with the eCitizen portal, Singapore's G2C one-stop shop in 2003.
Direct Point of Contact?	All application documents provide an e-mail address at the bottom so that people are may easily ask questions or make comments directly to the staff in-charge.	The Feedback Unit has a One Stop Feedback Form that links from the eCitizen portal. On the form, the citizen can specify which Ministry to send the feedback to, or leave it blank and allow the Feedback Unit to divert the message. Each ministry/department has a quality service manager with a toll-free line for complaints/ feedback.
Internally Tracked?	The OPEN system requires that at each review stage the relevant official input the date and time when each application is processed	The internal database tracks when the feedback is received and when the feedback is given.
Externally Tracked?	Return postcards are sent to those who have applied for permits or approvals from the municipal government, ensuring some feedback. The results of these surveys form part of a new Anti-Corruption Index" (ACI). Additional channels of direct dialogue have been opened between citizens and the mayor. Examples include hot lines, e-mails, and the "Mayor's Saturday Date with Citizens" program.	Citizens receive an ID to track their feedback and should receive a response within 3 working days. The Feedback Unit also publishes responses to feedback that is relevant to a wider audience through their website and Feedback Quarterly newsletters.[3]

[1] Case Study on OPEN
http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/seoulcs.htm
[2] Singapore's Feedback Unit http://app.feedback.gov.sg/asp/index.asp
[3] Sample of Feedback Newsletter
http://app.feedback.gov.sg/data/adm08%5Cc2%5Cp761%5CFBjan05_english.pdf

Similar to Singapore, India has implemented public grievance systems in various states across the country. The Government of Chhattisgarh has launched a Public Grievance Monitoring System that allows citizens to submit and track their grievances online.[4] The system monitors how government officials address the grievance. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi has launched a public grievance portal that automatically reroutes the feedback to relevant departments and can trace grievances both internally and externally.[5]

PFMs associated with a direct government service are more straight forward to implement because it may only deal with one Ministry. For example, online vehicle registration can be entirely handled by the Ministry of Transportation. When the focal point receives the information, s/he can process it the same way over the counter vehicle registration applications are handled. A separate feedback unit or public grievance portal like that of Singapore and India requires more coordination between the different government ministries. For example, in Singapore's case, the citizen sends the message directly to their agency of choice from the portal, but if s/he does not know which agency to send it to, the Feedback Unit redirects it. While the Feedback Unit has a policy of reverting back to the citizen within three business days, each Ministry also has its own policy on how long it will take to process the information. The citizen is informed at every step of the process with emails updating the status of the information.

What are the benefits and challenges of implementing a public feedback mechanism?

Public feedback mechanisms are critical in e-Government deployments because they help transform citizen to government relationships by holding governments accountable. Both the Korea and Singapore initiatives have received positive responses from their citizens. 84.3% of a random sample of 1,245 Seoul citizens surveyed believed that Korea's OPEN system led to greater transparency, and no corrupt practices of civil servants have been filed since the implementation. The site received over 648,000 visits within the first thirteen months of its launch. Citizens in Singapore have actively participated in various activities of the Feedback Unit since 1985. Singapore's Feedback Portal receives 800 submissions per month on average, which is 62% of all the feedback the Unit receives. In a survey of 1,500 respondents conducted in July 2005, 82% of the people believed that the Feedback Unit collects timely feedback, 74% believed that the channels are adequate and user-friendly, and 63% believed that the Unit is effective in gathering feedback.[6]

While the benefits are clear, efforts to launch PFMs are likely to run into institutional challenges such as legacy systems, insufficient documentation, and lack of cross agency collaboration. Singapore benefited from having the organizational structure in place long before they launched their website. Since most governments do not have such existing structures, implementing a PFM would require greater institutional reform. Governments will need to tackle both technology and institutional challenges in order to successfully launching a PFM. The Indian initiatives for example, created front end channels to direct feedback but still needs to work on reforming internal work processes. Providing front end grievance channels without proper backend support can lead to having more feedback than what the government can adequately handle. Creating a backlog will lead to citizens' loss in confidence in the system.

Conclusion

Public feedback mechanisms are an important subset of two-way interactions in e-Government initiatives because they help ensure transparency and accountability. Building a public feedback mechanism requires a combination of technological support, clearly defined policies, and focal points that are held accountable. In order to better improve the system, governments should evaluate the performance of PFMs by looking at the turnaround times for replying to submissions, the specificity of the responses, the percentage of responses that are adequately addressed, and the perceptions of the mechanism both from the citizen and civil servant perspective. Such an exercise would reveal whether e-Government initiatives are merely creating another distribution channel for government services or are actually improving transparency and accountability.

~ Carol Chyau, UNDP-APDIP

Additional Reading

Asia-Pacific e-Government Portal
http://www.egovaspac.org

Pascual, P.J., 2003. e-Government, e-Primers for the Information Economy, Society and Polity, e-ASEAN Task Force and UNDP-APDIP
http://eprimers.apdip.net/series/info-economy/e-gov-toc

UNDP-APDIP Collection of Resources on e-Government
http://www.apdip.net/resources/egovernance-egovernment

Building a Public Feedback Mechanism, Public Sector Technology and Management. 29 April 2005
http://www.pstm.net/article/index.php?articleid=596

Case Study on OPEN
http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/seoulcs.htm

Singapore's Feedback Unit
http://app.feedback.gov.sg/asp/index.asp

World Bank's e-Government Site
http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/

Acknowledgements

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[4] http://www.apdip.net/case/e-gov/in/pgms
[5] http://www.indiatogether.org/photo/2005/gov-pgr.htm
http://complaints.mcdonline.gov.in/
[6] Correspondence with Feedback Unit