

“Things will be easier and less time consuming”: Attitudes towards public services on the Internet (English summary)

Norwegian authorities want to make all relevant public services accessible on the Internet. An important element in this enterprise is the MinSide (“MyPage”) project, which is intended to be a net-based public service office that gathers all available public services in one web portal.

What do people think about public services being available on the Internet? The Board of Technology convened three citizen panels that discussed the following topics:

- Attitudes and expectations to public services on the Internet
- Privacy, security and trust
- Accessibility and user-friendliness
- Democracy and participation

Great expectations

The participants in the citizen panels are positive to there being more public services on the Internet, and have great expectations to the quality of the services being raised as a result. They believe it is high time that the authorities as well exploit the possibilities afforded by information technology.

Even though the participants are positive to public services being on the net, this does not mean that they do not have concerns or reservations.

Trust in the authorities, but sceptical to the insurance companies

The panel participants are very confident that the authorities protect their privacy in an adequate manner, but they express concern regarding health information. They nonetheless want information on their own health to be shared within the public health services, if this may enhance the services and make them more efficient. They are willing to accept a certain risk, such as information ending up in the wrong hands, in order to simplify and improve the system. One of the participants puts it this way: *“I notice that I’m somewhat uncritical, because it’s so nice when things are simple.”*

The panels point out that privacy is not necessarily in such good shape in today’s system either: *“You have to disclose a lot of personal information at the counter, and it is all very open.”*

The panel participants are particularly concerned that sensitive information should end up at insurance companies or other outside parties. They think it is entirely acceptable that the authorities use the personal information they have stored in order to expose tax evasion or welfare fraud.

A desire to control personal information

Even though the participants have great confidence in the authorities, they want to control the information that is stored about them themselves. They want to be explicitly asked for

permission when a given party accesses sensitive information. The participants also want to implement a log system that shows who has created, modified and accessed their personal information. In addition a system should be implemented, similar to the one currently used in credit rating, where the concerned party is informed when one public office passes on information to another one.

Freedom of choice is important

What about those who cannot use information technology, or refuse to do so? How shall their interests be maintained? The panel participants agree that digital services must not be the only possibility, and that it will still be important to be able to meet the public authorities physically and have permanent contact persons. *“The [digital] cannot entirely supplant the physical”*, one of the participants says. People should be able to choose how they want to communicate and interact with public authorities.

A fear of the digital divide

The citizen panels expressed fear that new dividing lines will be created through the increased digitalization of public administration. One of the participants states: *“I think things are happening at such a speed that many people are unable to follow”*. Digital competence will undoubtedly be important in order to use public services on the Internet. Adequate training and guidance will be important so that as many as possible may “follow”. The panels also point out that the public sector’s web pages should therefore be user-friendly, and it must be possible to provide feedback on the services.

Easier to express opinions

The panel participants believe that information technology will make it easier to become involved in politics and society. The threshold for making suggestions and expressing opinions is much lower via e-mail and Internet forums, as long as one masters the technology itself. *“I have never attended local council meetings, but I might well access the net and express my opinion”*, one of the participants says. The participants have therefore great expectations that the net will provide a better opportunity for dialogue and participation – but they do not necessarily believe that they will gain greater influence.

A request for better information on MinSide (“MyPage”)

According to the participants, the authorities should strive to promote the MinSide project to the public. Most of them were unaware of MinSide until they came in contact with the Board of Technology’s eGovernment project. Many of the participants were also unaware of the many public services that already exist on the net. The message to the authorities is: *“They have to spread the word!”*