

eGovernment: Summary and Conclusions (English version)

The Internet has in recent years become a natural part of everyday life for an increasing number of Norwegians. Through computers and cell phones we can communicate with each other whenever and wherever, and all the information in the world is in theory at our fingertips. Those who use the net on a regular basis have gradually come to expect all manner of information and services there – including from the public sector. Now the authorities as well want to use this channel in their communication with the public.

Through increased coordination in public systems and the creation of a citizen portal – MinSide (“MyPage”) – the Government wants to achieve better service, increased freedom of choice, less red tape and increased public efficiency. This strategy also entails several challenges, among them issues relating to sound administration ethics, privacy, security and accessibility. The transition to an increased use of electronic communication will obviously also challenge traditional bureaucracy.

The self-service society

Within an increasing number of areas we are expected to serve ourselves, without help from the “middlemen” who previously provided advice and guidance. For many products and services, such as electronics and travel, a lower price can be obtained if you yourself do all the work related to placing an order. Some public services are already popular on the net, such as the Norwegian Public Employment Service (Aetat) and the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Lånekassen).

It is obviously a challenge to find a solution that allows those who want to do so to serve themselves on the Internet, while simultaneously maintaining the interests of those who need help from a physical person. Is this possible if the goal at the same time is to reap the benefits of increased efficiency?

How should the authorities entice people to go “on the net”?

Online banks have been highlighted by many as a model for the public sector on the net. In the space of a relatively few years, banks have managed to persuade a large percentage of their customers to “do the job themselves”, and customers are overwhelmingly positive to this form of self-service. There are many fundamental differences between the public sector and the banks, however, and it is not given that the banks’ experiences can be transferred to the public sector.

Price has been an important incentive in getting bank customers to use the Internet – the authorities cannot in the same manner press their “customers” from the counter and to the computer. In addition, bank services are something that most people use regularly, and in that respect the attainment of “unlimited” opening hours has been a benefit that many have appreciated, and that has been of great importance in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Most people use public services relatively seldom, and this may be a critical challenge when incorporating the Internet as a channel, with MinSide as a web portal. It is therefore of particular importance that the parties that have the most user contact, such as the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organisation (NAV), the Norwegian Tax Administration

(Skatteetaten) and the most important municipal services, are swiftly persuaded to find a place on MinSide, so that users may feel confident of finding the sought-after information in a straightforward manner and with an easily recognizable user interface.

Expectations to public bureaucracy will change

The Internet and electronic communication exhibit certain fundamental traits that will likely influence the users' communication with, and expectations to, public authorities. Experienced Internet users expect a swift and often informal response. This is not necessarily compatible with the principles that underlay defensible public administration, such as the rule of law and equal treatment. It is important to communicate that defensible bureaucratic procedures take time – at the same time the user can obtain information on both the whereabouts of his or her case in the system and on the relevant deadlines.

Will some be worse off when the situation for others improves?

As the Internet becomes an important channel for contact with the authorities, it also becomes more important for users to master those skills that enable access to the public net services. Individuals are increasingly expected to have – or be able to obtain – the necessary information. Individuals must additionally understand which information is relevant and which may be ignored.

This entails that the ability to read and write, and to master one of the official languages in Norway, becomes even more important. In addition, a type of “system competence” or digital competence is required, something that at least many seniors do not possess. Those groups that lack these skills will be unable to make use of the net-based services. Even though physical offices will exist in parallel with the Internet in the foreseeable future, users of net services will be able to obtain certain benefits that non-users miss out on – such as increased opening hours, more expedient processing and a greater degree of equal treatment. It may also be questioned whether the development of net-based services will lead to a reduction in manual services.

Who is responsible for the user's PC security?

When public systems are increasingly merged or exchange data, the end result is larger and more complex systems. This leads to increased vulnerability, both technically and in regard to human error. The consequences of such errors are also magnified when the systems contain more comprehensive data on each individual. The use of new technologies such as e-mail and instant messaging increase vulnerability to external attacks, perhaps mostly with regard to the users themselves, who are not supported by a professional apparatus that could ensure the adequate safeguarding of their PC and other equipment.

When data is coordinated, the individual becomes more transparent

The exchange and reuse of data among departments and systems may also pose a threat to privacy. It is therefore important to use the possibilities that technology affords for differentiated access, in order to ensure that bureaucrats and others do not have access to data they do not need. When data pertaining to a specific agency is exchanged, it should be upon consent, and the individual whom the data concerns should be informed about each transaction.

People should have access to their own data and logs

At the same time, the citizens' access to their own data should be improved, and the individual should have the opportunity to follow how their case is being processed and to inspect logs to see who has created, modified or accessed “their” information. This would

strengthen the users' protection against unauthorized access, and also afford them the opportunity to control the quality of their own data, while simultaneously achieving a greater balance between the bureaucrats' and the users' information.

An alternative channel for democratic participation

When a greater amount of public information is available on the net, citizens will be on a more equal standing with bureaucrats and politicians in cases that concern them. At the same time that the Internet is used as an information channel – for both personalized and general information – it is also important to facilitate feedback. Should the Internet be increasingly used as a channel for hearings, discussions and actions, it might lead to increased public interest and a broader democratic participation.