
Information Technology Redefining Inequality In The Public Sector IT and Public Management



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More governments are using information technology to find easier and faster ways to solve problems, to reduce distance, build relationships between public officials and citizens, and to transform human connection through social media, emails, video conferencing and instant messaging. “Administrative systems around the world have witnessed growth in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT’s) in the on-line delivery of public information, and services, more recently in connected governance. Using government Web portals as a one stop online source of information and services has become the norm in developed countries” (Chen & Hsieh, 2009).

Congress and many state legislatures have contributed to redefining inequality in the public sector by enacting policies that allow for formerly excluded communities or marginalized groups to be more meaningfully engaged and empowered through the use of modern technology, resulting in effecting changes in public service. These policies promote closing the digital divide regardless of socio-economic status, age, gender, ethnicity and race. Prime examples of legislation closing the digital gap and creating new alignments between government and citizens, are the expansion of broadband access by allocating additional resources and negotiating a reduction in cost for low-income communities (FCC, May 2023) and providing free smartphones to the homeless (Today, May 2021) and those populations receiving government assistance programs like Lifeline and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP), Medicaid and SSI (Mgryczon) (n.d.) increasing the digital footprint of Telehealth and Telemedicine by mandating state health insurance plans to cover the cost for low income individuals and families (HHS.gov.(n.d.) by permitting remote educational instructions for all ages (U.S. Dept of Ed)(n.d.), and facilitating laptops for students (Lambeck, March 2020), as well as permitting the utilization of video conferencing technology for the nursing/group homes to remain socially connected with loved ones (NYSHFA NYSCAL, Aug 2020), and required the use of virtual platforms to ensure government transparency and citizen engagement during public meetings (Open Government Partnership) (n.d.).

Using a citizen-centric approach aimed at connecting citizens (Wood, 2021) has also increased service provisions in many areas of e-government. “E-Government is the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees” (Silcock, 2001). The immediate access to data, resources and forms regardless of geographic location, business hours and time zones, by using technology has helped to tackle the gap between government and the people it

serves, and it has helped to transform the political and policy decision-making process, service delivery and relationships.

E-government policies and civic-tech software applications (Wood, 2021) have not only redefined how governments communicate with citizens and businesses, but also how governments collaborate with each other (Chen, Y. C., Hu, L. T., et al., 2019) and their employees. Non-confidential datasets are released to help with market research and voting history, for example. The software also provides access to human resource information like personnel policies. These innovative approaches have created a more inclusive, functional, efficient, effective, accountable and responsible form of government, thereby improving daily and/or routine business, amplifying access to resources and increasing community engagement.

Many public organizations have also signed onto the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a declaration that commits governments to stand together in solidarity of human rights, against corruption and for good governance. Citizens are now demanding more openness and transparency in government aligned with national priorities and citizen aspirations. Part of the principles outlined in the declaration are to use the power of technology to empower communities, provide equal access to technology and to make the government more accountable for policy decision-making and their actions, as well as to fight corruption. Government's are pledging to solicit citizen feedback and to take the same into account, to ensure equitable representation in policy formation and more public engagement (Open Government Partnership, March, 2023)

Leveling the playing field between the already powerful and the marginalized communities, will entail continued intentional and meaningful dialogue between policy-makers and all citizens, regardless of background. Increased citizen involvement and contributions can lead to social change and social justice, as well as strengthen what works and to learn from what has failed in government. For instance, the COVID-19 public health emergency forced government officials to become more aware of the existing disparities in technology and the emergent need for increased access and improvement. It shed light on discriminatory policies like the adoption of 5th Generation (5G) technology in certain sectors inclusive of higher socio-economic communities and territories where governments are able to afford technological upgrades. These business decisions can and have drawn a wedge between upscale and minority or low-income communities. These technologies provide faster internet speed, more reliability and network capacity, higher performance and efficiencies, connect new industries and provide new user experience, among other benefits (Flahive, P., 2020, February 25). A perfect example of an e-commerce industry that stands to benefit from the use and access to smart technologies are the small farmers located in rural areas

or in developing countries (United Nations. n.d.) By connecting small farmers worldwide to sources that help to facilitate better planning strategies, improve agricultural productivity, mitigate challenges by having real-time access to data and analysis that shape decision-making at every stage of the agricultural process, governments also increase the chances of communities in food desert areas to have greater access to affordable and nutritious food (Wright, P. by A 2011, May 3).

Surveys conducted in the United States in recent years and in comparison to pre-pandemic times, show that participants agree that the government's reliance and use of information technology has been transformational in the policy-making process, citizen engagement, transparency and accountability. A citizen-centric approach in e-government has enhanced service delivery, but surveys also show that technology cannot act alone. These changes require strong leadership and change in organizational culture. In a survey conducted in the United States, “it was observed that among the state and federal chief information officers, 86% felt that e-government had improved service delivery, 83% believed that it had made government more efficient, and 63% claimed that it had reduced government costs. Twenty-nine percent felt Congress or their state legislature had been very helpful in developing e-government” (Gupta and Jana 2003, December 11). Another federal survey says that “even as Internet use among White non-Hispanics was unchanged at 82 percent from 2019 to 2021, it increased from 75 percent to 77 percent during this period among both African Americans and Hispanics. We also observed outsized increases in connectivity along other demographic lines, including seniors, persons with disabilities, and those in low-income households. These groups made significant gains in the breadth of tools at their disposal, including in their computing devices and types of Internet access services” (NTIA)(n.d.). Granted, in many cases there remains a substantial disadvantage, that would require governments’ to continue to make a concerted effort to financially invest and to work on progressive policies that ensure equal access to infrastructure that should over time successfully assist in further redefining inequality in the public sector, as it relates to the use of modern technology. Unlike in years past, I believe that implementing new technology and technological upgrades should no longer be considered a luxury, but a necessity, and that equal access to all citizens provides for a more efficient government and service delivery, as evidenced by post-pandemic studies and analysis.

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