

HOW TO COVER CITIZENS' NEED IN MAKING MANDATORY THE E-GOVERNMENT CHANNEL. EVIDENCES FROM ITALIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Italian Government has encouraged its Public Administrations to deliver public services only by the e-government channels since 2014. Few Italian Local Governments in the last years carried out this transformation, delivering some of their service only online. Such process challenged and forced Local Government to modify their behaviours, practices and organisations. Through a multiple case study, this article studies how practitioners managed the delivery of education services mandatorily by the e-government channel. We found that this change asks for a complete redesign of how the contact points towards the final users are managed and orchestrated, in order to grant that, at the same time: (i) the users change their behaviour and habits, and start considering the e-government channel as the default and exclusive option available; (ii) it does not cause potential exclusion or de facto discrimination towards specific categories of users.

Keywords: e-government, digital services, mandatory e-government channel, organisational transformation, Local Governments

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main challenges that Public Administrations are facing nowadays is to encourage citizens to use the online channel to access public services. In fact, e-government studies demonstrate that the online channel, when available, and even when matching due quality standards, does not get to be preferred to the traditional one (Coursey & Norris, 2008). As a result, e-government channels are added-on rather substitute traditional ones (Anthopoulos, Reddick, Giannakidou, & Mavridis, 2016). To overcome this problem, the Italian government has encouraged its Public Administrations to deliver public services only with e-government channels since 2014¹. This process, currently underway also in other countries (see for example Madsen and Kræmmergaard (2015) for the Danish strategy and Kumar, Sachan, and Mukherjee (2018) for the Indian one), requires that practitioners and academics start thinking of how to make e-government channel mandatory. Such process carries a 'disruptive' potential because it challenges and forces the modification of institutional behaviour, practices and organisations in order to grant that, at the same time: (i) the users change their behaviour and habits, and start considering the e-government channel as the default and exclusive option available; (ii) it does not cause potential exclusion or *de facto* discrimination towards specific categories of users.

The study adopts an exploratory case study methodology (Yin, 2014), focusing on Italian Local Governments that in the past few years carried out this transformation in the

¹ This intent is explicit in the Italian national strategic document ("Strategia per la crescita digitale 2014-2020") where is defined as a "switch-off" project.

education sector. The research describes possible organizational and behavioural mechanisms and dynamics controlled and/or put in place by a Public Administration in order redesign and orchestrate the contact points for avoiding discrimination towards specific categories of users, overcoming resistances and ensuring users' approval for the new way of service delivery.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: E-GOVERNMENT ADOPTION AND MANDATORY E-GOVERNMENT CHANNEL

Several studies from behavioural sciences try to identify techniques that help in increasing the usage of e-government services. Information System (IS) research introduced several models for leveraging e-government adoption, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis 1989).

These studies came out with different ways for increasing e-government adoption all connected to the attempt of making the service easier to adopt and/or making the existing behaviour harder (Faulkner, Jorgensen, & Koufariotis, 2018).

A possible way for making the online service easier to adopt is to let it perceived as the default option. As stated by Faulkner, Jorgensen, and Koufariotis (2018) users tend to do not make an active choice but, when they have a set of option available, select the default one. This behaviour is due to the fact that users always choose the solution that requires the littler effort (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). By changing defaults, reframing the way of presenting a delivery channel, the behaviour of the users change and they will approach the e-government channel (i) just out of the solution with a better pay-off in the short term because it doesn't require any effort or (ii) because of a lack of knowledge of the existing alternatives (Faulkner et al., 2018).

Another possible way is to put into action activities that create "facilitating conditions" for helping the users in using the service (Faulkner et al., 2018), these activities include offering skill training sections and provide support for encouraging users in dealing with the e-government channel (Rana, Dwivedi, & Williams, 2015). These activities have the purpose of create a new environment acting on self-efficacy and behavioural control.

In the body of literature of e-government adoption, only few articles address the opportunity to make the e-government channel mandatory. Madsen and Kræmmergaard (2015), stating from the fact that the Danish e-government strategy has made the interaction through e-government channel mandatory, present a study on citizens' domestication of mandatory e-government channels. They discover that citizens benefit from (i) third party channels like search engines or web banking and (ii) the simultaneous presence of multiple communication channels both digital channels and offline channels (like telephone number). Moreover, the usage of the e-government channel can be compromised by problems occurring during the interaction and the lack of feedbacks.

Chan et al. (2010) studied a model of technology adoption starting from the case of introduction of a smart card for citizen identification and access to e-government service in the specific context of a mandatory e-government channel.

Kumar, Sachan, and Mukherjee (2018) classifies e-government adoption starting from the case of India, where government has made mandatory the access though the e-government channel for few public services. They study the adoption of e-government service, and which factors influence the choice of the direct or indirect channel for service delivery.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This article adopts an exploratory multiple case methodology (Yin, 2014). Our unit of analysis is the single Local Government (or Municipality, in this article the two terms are used as synonyms), we select Local Governments that migrate some services towards a mandatory e-government channel.

We decide to focus on 4 Municipalities in Italy. The cases were selected scanning a set of Municipalities that successfully migrate to the e-government channel in some education services and are now delivering those services mandatorily by the e-government channel. The final set of 4 was selected through the professional advice of experts revolving around the research group, subsequently narrowed down by geo-demographical characteristics. All case studies involved a preliminary interview to test the compliance with the research aim.

Education services comprise: enrolment in city schools and kindergartens; enrolment and payment of school transportation; enrolment and payment of pre- and after-school activities. Such services are delivered to a limited and usually younger portion of citizenship, and consequently they are often the first ones chosen by Local Governments to trigger a migration to a mandatory e-government channel. Four cases were selected: Case B is a big Municipality with more than 300.000 inhabitants; Cases A and D are medium-size Municipalities (between 20.000 and 40.000 inhabitants); Case C is a small town of around 3.000 inhabitants. All four successfully switched from a traditional, analogical service delivery to an only digital one between 2015 and 2018.

We relied on several data sources: face-to-face interviews, phone conversations, follow-up emails, and archival data such as internal or public documents, press releases, websites, and news articles.

The primary data source was 12 semi-structured interviews conducted over 10 months with IT managers and employees and the managers of the educational sector of the Municipalities. Case C, due to the small size of the Municipalities has a different structure without a proper internal IT sector, therefore we interviewed the major and the IT managers and employees of the in-house company.

4. RESULTS

In doing the interviews we find out that the main concern of the interviewees in making the e-government channel mandatory and the most significant activities in terms of resources employed (both financial and human resources) were the ones related to the redesign of the contact point. Contact points in this article are defined as any material places, referees or remote communication channels that are places where citizens can refer to regarding the public service. In particular, four different types of contact point were identified: customer service centre, remote support, intermediaries and street level bureaucracy.

CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE REDESIGN

The mandatory e-government channel has to be matched with a redesign of the Municipality's customer service centre. According to previous studies, customer service centre is defined as a material office where users can go for accessing a public service (Faulkner et al., 2018).

Despite the willingness to deliver the service only by the e-government channel, the Administration has to consider two different reasons for which a material *ad hoc* place is needed: (i) the minorities affected by digital divide, and (ii) the exceptions, possibly resulting from the stiffness of the e-government channel.

Digital divide refers to the existing gap between individuals that have access to the internet and individuals that do not have or have a restricted access to it (Helbig, Gilgarcía, & Ferro, 2009).

All the four cases had to face the issue of a potential exclusion of minorities. To avoid the problem, they redesigned the customer service centre and they took advantage of the public libraries (as explained in the paragraph 5.3 about intermediaries).

Case B and Case D faced this issue because of the presence of a foreign minority. In both cases the office did not directly deliver a service but instead it became a place where individuals received support from public employees in accessing the online service. As stated by the school services responsible of case B:

Case B: “we made a deal with the immigration office and now when a foreign citizen has difficulties in doing the online procedure, they go to the immigration office where the procedure remains only digital, but there is a dedicated person to support them”.

Not only users affected by digital divide request a material customer service centre, the interviewed often declare that the e-government channel is too stiff to manage all exceptions that could emerge when a service is delivered in a new way.

Especially case B, that in the biggest Municipality in our sample, reports experiences of users that, despite possessing sufficient digital skills and tools to access to the online service, faced a situation too peculiar to be managed via the e-government channel. As stated by the school services responsible of case B:

Case B: “We have two employees at the call-centre that schedule appointments for the users that need specific help. There are peculiar cases that is difficult to manage online. A real example is a woman with three twins, her case was really complicated to manage, and the online service was not customized for that. For those exceptional cases, we have employees that are qualified for helping.”

In Case D, instead, a problem related to students residing in a nearby Municipality came out. The civil registry in Italy belongs to the Municipality, therefore students that come from another Municipality cannot be registered into the electronic system. Case D has a school nearby the boundary of another Municipality, and consequently it has students that are not registered in its civil registry. It decided to manage the circumstance inviting the user to schedule an appointment at the municipal office. As stated into the information sheet:

Case D: “People residing in the Municipality of [...] and enrolled in the schools [...] for presenting the application for have to schedule an appointment, calling the following number [...]”

The cases illustrate that the turning point for the face-to-face assistance is that “*the procedure remains only digital*”. A complete digital transformation has to be combined with a complete redesign of the customer service centre. The material contact point has to transform from a place where individuals fill printed form from a place where individuals receive support from public employees in accessing the online service.

Moreover, all cases create multiple customer service centres targeted for each specific user need. This change incremented the quality of the service offered: citizens can refer to an office with the skills for managing their peculiar case.

P1. When the e-government channel becomes mandatory, the customer service centre has to be redesigned in order to have a complementary material place in which citizens with specific issues in accessing the online services can receive the support of a public employee.

REMOTE SUPPORT STRENGTHENING

According to the “Media Richness Theory” (MRT) (Daft & Lengel, 1986), communication channels differ in their “richness”, (defined as the information carrying capacity); face-to-face communication is the communication channel with the highest richness, followed by the telephone communication and then the letters, the personally tailored reports and finally the impersonal ones (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

When the e-government channel becomes mandatory, the richest channel (face-to-face communication) is removed (except for the cases described in the paragraph 5.1), leaving a gap to bridge with the strengthening of the other channels. Our case studies show a precise plan for strengthening all other available channels.

All the cases offer a direct phone number and e-mail assistance. These channels are used to provide information about the service, to solve problems with low complexity and eventually to schedule an appointment for solving the most complex issues. All the interviewees declare that remote assistance was strengthened, and the Administration answered rapidly to the question received.

Case C was the only one amongst the selected case studies that implemented an online chat system with an employee that instantly answers to the users’ requests. Before starting the chat, the system requests a telephone number in case a direct assistance is needed.

Case C. “Users with some issue, before calling, often contact us though the online chat, that is real time, more or less 12 hours per day, during the week. We instantaneously respond to all the questions”

Case D, instead, created an *ad hoc* WhatsApp number where citizens can ask questions about the online service.

All the four cases strengthened the remote communication channels in order to be responsive to the users’ needs. The interviewees confirm that the telephone is the richer communication channel, all the cases use the channel for more complex cases and provide a telephone number for users that prefer a direct contact with the Administration.

The experience of Case C in using the chat and the one of Case D in using a WhatsApp number explore how new technologies can be adopted in order to be more responsive to citizens’ needs.

P2. When the e-government channel becomes mandatory, all the other communication channels have to be strengthened to make up for the absence of the face-to-face channel. New technologies can enable richer digital communication channels, such as an online chat.

INTERMEDIARIES SUPERVISION

Intermediaries are defined as “any public or private organisation facilitating the coordination between public service providers and their users” (Bailey & Bakos, 1997). With the introduction of the mandatory e-government channel, in all selected case studies, the intermediation of other public and private organisations became fundamental.

Intermediaries are involved in the payment step and in assistance activities for people with no or limited access to internet.

All the case studies integrated the mandatory e-government channel with the Italian national payment platform (PagoPA) that allowed the payment both through online and offline channels. In particular, tobacco shops became a place where users can go for paying the amount due.

The Municipalities realised that their involvement from the beginning of the migration process was fundamental. All the cases implemented specific activities not only for communicating the novelty but for training the intermediaries and assure that they have the needed competences.

In Case C the mayor, in collaboration with technical experts of the in-house society physically visited all the tobacco shops of the Municipality for explaining the new delivery process and their role in it. As stated by the mayor:

Case C. “we explain them that citizens would start to arrive for school taxes payment and which kind of document they would have shown. In doing that, we realise that the tobacconists were not trained, they did not know the procedure. Therefore, we came there with a facsimile of the payment notification and we did payment tests together with them.”

The same experience was also reported by Case C where IT employees personally trained the owners of the tobacco shops.

In all the cases, the public library became (or remained if the service was already available before the e-government channel became mandatory) a place where individuals can, on the one hand, have free internet access and, on the other hand, interact with a person who could provide the assistance needed. In the Italian context, libraries are not actually intermediaries because they are managed directly by the Municipality. However, their role and their tasks are *de facto* similar to the ones described in previous studies in other countries (see for example Taylor et al. 2014). To be coherent with the actual body of knowledge and allow comparison of the results in future studies we included them into the intermediary section.

Case C is the most interesting case for how and why they decided to involve the library. They introduce the position in the public library together with the mandatory e-government channel not only for helping people with digital divide, but for fostering the process of users change of habits.

Case C: “The internet access in the library was an excuse: if we hadn’t put it, we would have allowed people to complain and to request to come to the municipal office. This solution would have overload the Municipality and lead the citizen to the simplest way”

The cases analysed confirm previous studies about the relevance of intermediation in public service delivery. The role of intermediaries become even more important when the service is delivered mandatorily by the e-government channel. The Administration has to make sure that the intermediaries possess the required skills to deliver the service.

P3. Intermediaries play a central role in public service delivery, especially when the e-government channel becomes mandatory. They could partially deliver the service or support users with no or limited internet access. The Administration has to make sure that the intermediaries possess the required skills and otherwise dedicate to them specific training session.

STREET LEVEL BUREAUCRACY INVOLVEMENT

Street level bureaucracies (SLBs) comprehend every a public employee that has a direct, often face-to-face, interaction with the final users (Buffat, 2015; Lipsky, 1980). SLB has been debated in literature as a strong way to determine efficacy and legitimacy in public policies implementation (van Engen, Steijn, & Tummers, 2019).

In our study we limited the concept of STB to the public employees that are not specifically involved in service delivery, rather they are part of the ecosystem of players that are the front-line with respect to the final users and play a central role in disseminate the novelty. In our cases SLBs are: school bus driver, teachers, janitors and employees assigned to information point.

In the analysed cases, the way to make the e-government channel mandatory was sustained by significant actions of SLBs awareness. Specific actions were dedicated to

public employees whom the users usually interact with. Those employees are essential to answer to questions, manage doubts and problems and acquire complaints.

The cases demonstrate that SLBs play a fundamental role in disseminating the novelty and facilitating the approval of mandatory e-government channel by the users.

In Case B teachers and all the school employees were informed about the novelty. The Municipality recognised that the users often ask or call the school to get the information they need. Moreover, there are particular events (like school open days) where teachers can directly inform the users about novelties.

Case B. "People were informed because we organise open days to show the school. Teachers, educators and all the personnel are informed. [...]. The people that work at nursery, at the school and that answer to phone calls has to be the first to be informed about the novelty because if there are problems in the use of the digital services, citizens always refers to them."

Case A has a peculiar territorial structure, with a vast territory and several districts, therefore the Municipality structured several information points across the municipal boundaries for answering to citizens' questions and covering basic citizens' needs. This information points are part of the SLB as defined above because they do not deliver any service but are a material place where citizens and firms can ask for any information. Employees at the contact point were crucial to help users in understanding and accepting the change, because they are the contact point with greater probability of relationship for those who had not grasped the transition of channel and reference point. Specific activities were dedicated to coach, train and inform the contact points about the novelty.

Case A. "It is crucial to indoctrinate who works at the counter, because is the natural touch point for users where complain about the use of public services."

In case C, the Municipality has carried out some initiatives to involve and to instruct teachers, who carry on daily relationships with families, in order to make them able to explain to families, talking with them and listening to them, about the new forms of service provision.

Case C. "We have convinced teachers to explain to families the migration to the e-government channel of the public services."

In case D, school bus drivers were identified as the most adequate actors as they have daily relationships with a great number of families and they were identified as a feasible solution for conveying the message about the programmed change of paradigm and the consequent instructions. The Municipalities provided leaflets to the bus drivers and asked to them to deliver it directly to the students.

Case D. "There are communications to families that we make through the municipal school bus drivers. We create leaflet and we give it to the school bus driver. He delivers it to the children and he tells him to bring it to his parents"

Therefore, in all the analysed cases, SLBs have been identified as essential for migrating to the mandatory e-government channel. SLBs, due to their daily relation with citizens, were informed about the novelty for being able to answer to questions and manage complaints. In some cases, SLBs were also involved in the dissemination activities, the Municipality asked to them to announce the novelty to the final users.

P4. The involvement of the street-level bureaucracy is fundamental. These employees are the front office of the Municipality with respect to the final users, citizens will refer to them for doubts, question and constraints.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

A summary of the results suggested by the case studies is reported in Figure 1.

Coerently with the previous studies that demonstrate that ICT lead to disintermediation or re-intermediation (Bailey & Bakos, 1997; Janssen & Klievink, 2009), the cases studied suggest that there are two different categories of contact points that have to be orchestrated for mandatorily deliver a public service by the e-government channel: direct or indirect (displayed in the x-axes of the matrix). Direct contact points comprehend the ones directly presidiated by the employees of the Municipality that deliver the service. Indirect, instead, comprehend the ones that are presidiated by third parties. On the other side, there are two different tasks where the contact points can support the Administration in achiving the delivery of a mandatory e-government channel. Firstly they gurantee assistance to the final users, that can ask for technical assistance or a different way of access to the service. Secondly they disseminate the novelty and help in making the e-government channel accepted by the users.

Task	Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remote support • Customer service centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intermediaries
	Dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer service centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street Level Bureaucracy
		Direct	Indirect
		Type of channel	

Figure 1 - Contact points in mandatory e-government channel delivery

The four contact points that emerge from our study can be positioned in the matrix according to the type of channel and the task.

- Customer service centre: the customer service centre has to be redesign in order to become a place where citizens with specific issues in accessing the online services can receive the support of a public employee.
- Remote support: users can have issue or request of information about the service that can be solved without the face-to-face interaction.
- Intermediaries: they both partially deliver the service, in all cases they are involved for the payment step, and give assistance to the users with limited digital skills and/or a limited access to internet, like in the case of public libraries.
- Street level bureaucracy: public employees not specifically involved in service delivery but part of the ecosystem of players that are the front-line with respect to the final users play a central role in disseminate the novelty.

Our exploratory study demonstrates that public service delivery only by the e-government channels requires specific attention to how to orchestrate and manage the contact points. On the one hand, the Administration has to balance disintermediation and re-intermediation, redesigning the direct interaction with the final user and involving third parties. On the other hand, the Administration has to take into consideration to main tasks in which the contact points play a central rule: dissemination, with the aim of changing the habits and make users thinking about the e-government channel as the default one, and assistance, necessary to manage exceptions and to support people with digital divide.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the main challenges that Public Administrations are facing is to encourage citizens to use the online channel to access services. To overcome this problem, the Italian government has encouraged its Public Administrations to deliver public services only by e-government channels since 2014.

In order to explore this new phenomenon, we conducted an exploratory multiple case study (Yin, 2014), selecting four cases of Italian Local Governments that started delivering some services mandatorily by the e-government channel, and we focused on education services.

We discover that for managing a mandatory e-government channel, Administrations have to orchestrate various contact points, both directly managed by the employees who deliver the service (customer service centres and remote support) and by third parties (Street Level Bureaucracy and intermediaries).

Overall, the paper contributes to the existing literature by starting studying a new phenomenon that is taking place as a solution for e-government adoption, but until now is not broadly discussed at academic level. Moreover, the impact from a practitioners' point of view is clear: the article proposes a strategy for orchestrating the contact point when there is a will to make a complete redesign of a public service towards a mandatory e-government channel.

Mandatory e-government channel is a topic still not broadly discussed, therefore several opportunities for future research can be listed. Firstly, future research should seek to test and validate these lessons learned in other contexts or with different services. Moreover, further studies should go deeper into the findings of this study analysing if and under which conditions a task is prior with respect to the other and a contact point can become more problematic for the Administration. Finally, an analysis on the viewpoint of public managers about the opportunity of making the e-government channel mandatory could help understanding if the Italian national strategy and the case studies selected are pioneers of a new trend for public service delivery or if they are simply virtuous exceptions.

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