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# **Lessons from Implementation of a Web Site for the Israeli Citizens' Advice Bureau**

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## **Introduction**

Web-based services for the public raise some questions regarding the interaction between technology and social contexts in the public sector: Can the internet be harnessed to affect the flow of information from bureaucracy to the citizenry, making it two way rather than one? Are internet services just for yuppies? Will such services be just in English? Should public services on the internet expect to change linguistically, organizationally, conceptually, in response to the audiences they expect to serve? This paper, in an attempt to address such questions, presents a case study, about the web site of The Israeli Citizen Advice Bureau, a government agency that provides the public with information about rights, social benefits, government services, and civil obligations.

## **Case Study**

The size and complexity of modern bureaucracy often makes it harder to negotiate the mazes of civil systems. Rapid, convenient, understandable access to up-to-date information is a survival necessity for the modern citizen, but it is in short supply out on the periphery. The Israeli Citizens' Advice Bureau (ICAB), following the British model, has been in operation in Israel for more than 40 years. It had been a voluntary service until becoming a government agency in 1974. ICAB's advice is intended to help citizens manage the complexity of life in a modern welfare state by helping to disseminate information about obligations, rights, and expectations to the less fortunate in society's periphery. Most personnel at about 70 ICAB store-front centers, in 40 towns, are some 350 volunteers (mainly retirees) who respond, at no charge, to about 100,000 queries from the public each year. Follow-up and mediation between an ICAB client and the respective agency are required in about 45% of the cases. ICAB's advice database consists of hard-copy documents published by government agencies, local authorities, and volunteer organizations. ICAB was designed, from the start, on a centralized and manual operations model with three modes of information flow: (a) walk-in face-to-face or telephone communication, (b) hard-copy information dissemination, and (c) sparse volunteer-to-volunteer horizontal information exchange. ICAB's operations, however, were constrained to a large extent by the very nature of hard copy documents and the personal knowledge of ICAB personnel. ICAB's knowledge creation and dissemination was thus slow and tedious; information integrity could not be assumed; operating hours were extremely limited by lack of funding and volunteers availability; and there was virtually no mechanism to enable feedback regarding issues that concern the public.

The system described here is a nationwide intranet and extranet for creation, dissemination, and maintenance ICAB's services. The Hebrew ICAB web site (<http://shil.huji.ac.il/>) has been established in 1996 with three major goals in mind: (a) to expand the population benefiting from government information to the geographic, cultural, and socio-economic periphery. (b) To improve the flow of information between the public and various authorities as well as within the public authorities themselves. (c) To open a new information channel from the public to decision makers in government agencies.

The web site covers all the topics in the ICAB's manual database: consumer issues, compulsory and higher education, contact information for public and voluntary organizations, employees' rights and other labor laws, housing issues, immigrant absorption, marital laws, military service, obtaining legal advice, registration of changes in personal and commercial status, social security, taxation and tax exemptions, and welfare laws and benefits. The site also includes frequently asked questions, a bulletin board (400 entries during the first six months of operation), and a search engine. The site was accessed more than 130,000 times during its first year of existence.

Although Information Technology (IT) has been hailed for its potential to empower individuals in the information society, it has already become clear that successful IT diffusion depends not only on the merits of the technology but also on social and

cultural aspects (Dyson et al, 1994; Kling 1995; Pliskin, et al., 1993; Social Security Administration, 1997). To those in charge of the ICAB web project this meant that both design of the site and its implementation were critical.

Two major design issues had to be dealt with up-front. First, the site had to be written in Hebrew - the language with which most Israelis are familiar. Second, given the characteristics of ICAB's personnel, especially older ones (e.g. Ogozalek et al, 1992), and of the general public, especially users in the society's periphery, the system had to be easy to learn, use, and navigate, while still being efficient and visually appealing. The need to presume IT illiteracy dictated, for example, a user interface with the main menu staying on screen at all times and, for every topic, a short sequence of drill-down menus leading to a concise, up-to-date, and easy to comprehend text file that contains the relevant information. The latter design issue was addressed using common methods of web and graphic design and usability studies. However, the former issue turned out to be a major impediment because of the lack of Hebrew standards and tools on the web. Thus, a significant development effort was geared towards allowing ICAB personnel to update the information in Hebrew on a continuous basis and to exchange information, using a Hebrew bulletin board, among themselves and with the public. At the same time, since designers expected substantial number of visits to the site from other countries (mainly from Israelis who live abroad) the system was designed to allow users to ask questions or to post messages on the bulletin board in English, the Internet's Lingua Franca, as well. This added system flexibility had unexpected consequences on staffing decisions at ICAB because the person in charge of responding to user questions or messages had to not only be knowledgeable of the content area, but also proficient in both English and Hebrew.

Obviously, training all the IT-illiterate users, which are the majority among ICAB clientele and staff, has been out of the question. Since those who know how to use IT have an advantage over those who do not (Steyaert and Gould, 1997), it has been hoped that IT-illiterate clients could rely on more literate family members (e.g., children) and that, eventually, training would become more feasible once public libraries, clubs, and schools in Israel allow Internet access to all. Thus, training has only been targeted at ICAB volunteers who, to a large extent, serve as the first step in the two-step flow of communication (Katz, 1964) between the government and the public. Furthermore, given the low budget constraints on the entire process, emphasis was placed on training "in-house key users" (Fitzgerald and Cater-Steel, 1995) who were expected to support other users.

## **Lessons and Conclusions**

Experience with the ICAB web site, so far, allows us to shed light on the following issues.

First, the language issue. From the outset it was clear that the linguistic issue would challenge the construction, design, and implementation of the system because conveying fully interactive Internet and web services in Hebrew is hampered by different alphabets, fonts, printing and writing directions. Despite, the ICAB site is in Hebrew because, in Israel, native English speakers are a small minority and many of the adults are not comfortable with the English language. Now that usage patterns have been established, it is clear that making the extra effort to provide the information, search and query, and interaction capabilities in the indigenous language was the only way to serve the intended audience. We hope this lesson will be extended to providing the same services to large groups of Arabic, Russian and Amharic speakers still left out. In more general terms, the lesson here is that Internet services will have to abandon the notion that "English is the lingua franca". Instead, the Internet will only become universal once it serves indigenous populations in their languages.

Some clients, who have discovered the benefits of on-line interaction with the ICAB's database after using the search engine and the bulletin board, have started asking for enhancements such as interactive walk-throughs for dealing with exemptions applications and welfare benefits calculations. On one hand, this is indicative of one of the system's unintended achievements: educating citizens who were usually passive recipients of state benefits to become proactive in looking for their rights. This phenomenon clearly poses new challenges for those system designers charged with introducing future improvements. On the other hand, in the absence of mechanisms for on-line complex queries, the electronic medium promotes visits at ICAB centers among browsing citizens. Thus, the designers' goals of reducing some of the face-to-face activity at the ICAB due to web surfing by the general public might be offset, to some extent, by increased complex face-to face activity as a result of web surfing that did not lead to problem resolution.

The designers of the ICAB's web site had to constantly deal with political complications and disputes. For example, having been involved in designing another web site for an Israeli Civil Rights Organization, which included materials that could have significantly augmented ICAB's information, they offered to link the two sites and thereby improve the public accessibility to information. Since the Civil Rights Organization, which is often at odds with the government, was naturally identified with the Opposition, the developers found themselves in the middle of a political battle about minute wording differences in the two complementary information bases before some compromise was reached.

Some organizational change toward openness and decentralization has already been noted within ICAB following the implementation of the web site, and more change is expected as the site improves and more people gain access to it in the future. Although the ICAB site is a classic example of the potential use of IT in social contexts, it is too early to fully assess its role in social and cultural change. Still, it is possible to say that the population benefiting from government information has been expanded geographically (e.g., to Israeli citizens living abroad), and that hopes for improved information flow between the public and various authorities and within the public authorities themselves have been met as well. Thus, in this case, IT has already played a role in changing patterns of community life and the character of public institutions. Hopes for expansion of information access to the cultural and socio-economic periphery, however, have yet to be met.

Beyond these issues, several questions have surfaced. The first set of questions concerns design issues. Can systems intended for the periphery serve their intended audience through potentially alienating technology? Beyond the linguistic problem, at issue here are questions of access, bandwidth, information currency and public curiosity. So far, the web has had a better track record than technologies it has been compared to, such as interactive cable and videotext. Will systems such as ICAB survive past the novelty phase? Time and access logs will tell.

Next is the question of information flow. As has been noted above, web-based delivery of information has the potential of diverting information flows. Using such systems as a lever, organizational hierarchies can be reverted. For example, more policy can be based on information about citizens' needs culled from incoming flows of information about what people look for, what they ask about. Will the hypertextuality and connectivity afforded by web structures be seized upon to redraw the directions of flow? Will this improve the content of information provided? And will this be to the benefit of the public being served? (see, e.g. Rafaeli et al 1998).

The third concern is with nationwide, governmental-services delivery systems such as ICAB's web site, is a wider, social question. What is the potential impact on democracy and the communicative notions of dialog? Is the primitive one-way, top-down, broadcast notion of governmental hand-down information about to change, given the availability of interactive, two way media? How long and how much will and can governments commit the resources and openness required to sustain an interactive, open stage (Sudweeks and Rafaeli, 1996)? We have had surprisingly little abuse of the system so far. No detected attempts to break in, and only one foul message on an open bulletin board. The interim observations are, therefore, optimistic. It would be interesting to see how long this persists.

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