What users really want from online public services

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The IST-sponsored eUSER project behind the survey gathered vital data from 10 European countries on a wide range of topics. This included access technologies, use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) equipment and the internet, the attitudes of end users towards technology in general and the internet in particular, and their interaction with providers of services of public interest in the areas of health, education and public administration.

The ultimate aim now is to use all this information as a resource database on user needs in relation to online public services and on user-oriented methods for meeting these needs. The project will use this resource base to actively support the IST programme and projects, EU policy and the wider European research community to better address user needs in the design and delivery of online public services.

While the eUSER project mainly focused on the provision of online public services, its survey findings highlight the need to address wider issues of inequality and access to ICT in Member States, according to project coordinator Karsten Gareis.

"We found, not surprisingly, that online public service users are likely to be from the better-educated, more affluent and younger parts of the population. This is partly explained by unequal access to the internet, but also by unequal uptake of the services in general, for instance lifelong learning, which is much more widespread among younger and better educated citizens," he said.

On the plus side, however, he notes that eUSER data shows that once members of the disadvantaged population segments actually get online, they are just as likely to make full use of the medium and derive the same kind of positive benefits from them as those from early-adopter-groups. "This suggests that the internet has the potential to act as some sort of equaliser," he adds.

In terms of obstacles to usage of online public services by European citizens, Gareis identifies three main interrelated hurdles that need to be overcome if uptake is to be improved: Access barriers- internet access and access for people with functional restrictions (eyesight, dexterity), competence barriers -'e-skills' and 'digital literacy' and also literacy in a general sense, motivation barriers- willingness to use the service in general.

There are many reasons for this, according to Gareis: "In some countries, good service provision via the telephone acts as a barrier to the take-up of online usage and may actually be the preferable option from the users' viewpoint. Another reason why many people do not want to use online public services is that they would miss the social aspect of traditional services."

The solution, he believes, is for online services to become more socially embedded to win over these citizens. Improvements are also required in building awareness of online services among the target audience, and convincing them of the usefulness of these services. Issues of access and availability for those most at risk of being excluded, such as the elderly, ethnic minorities and disadvantaged populations, also need to be addressed.

Nevertheless, the eUSER survey also revealed some upbeat statistics in terms of satisfaction levels among service users. For example, over 66 per cent of e-learning users, 55 per cent of e-government users and 71

per cent of e-health users say they are fully satisfied with the online services they did use.

The willingness for repeat usage, which is the best indicator for effective satisfaction, is even higher. For example, five out of every six users of an online e-learning course said that they would do online learning again.

"The main recommendation is that online services need to be viewed in context of the service in general. Citizens don't care for online services as such – what they want is good government, learning, health services – full stop! This means that online delivery should fit seamlessly within overall service provision rather than being understood as simply an alternative channel for provision," he says.

Another key point is that service designers need to take a more holistic view of user needs when developing online services.

With the initial survey completed, there is no question of eUSER's valuable data gathering dust, according to Gareis. Rather, the eUSER knowledge repository will be maintained and perhaps expanded in the future.

"The medium-term objective of the consortium is to establish eUSER as the basis for a European eUSER Observatory, which would conduct surveys regularly in order to holistically measure user orientation of online services and, more generally, services of public interest in general," he ends.

Source: IST Results