

Executive Summary

e-Government, broadly speaking, is the digitalization of government operations through the use of Internet and the application of Information and Communication Technology (ITC). It provides government with opportunities to deliver more accessible public services of a higher quality. It is generally believed that effective implementation of e-services could enhance the performance of the government. It also helps create a positive public image of the government, providing favourable conditions to maintain good governance.

Since its establishment, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has implemented a number of e-Government plans. By 2017, more than 840 public services were provided online, up from around 700 in 2015.

A survey by the Census and Statistics Department noted that 73.4% of local residents aged 15-24 and 77.3% aged 25-34 had used online government services for personal affairs¹. In other words, there is still a large group of young people not using these services.

Research conducted by the Waseda University Institute of e-Government in Japan ranked Hong Kong top 10 in terms of e-Government development in surveys in 2005 and 2008. However, in subsequent surveys, Hong Kong fell out of the top ten, ranking 24th in 2015, 2016 and 2017.

One of the key ambitions of the current HKSAR Government is to build Hong Kong into a world-class smart city. e-Government services play an important role in achieving this. It is a matter of concern for the Government and the community as a whole to improve public services through the implementation of emerging technologies and enhancing

¹ Census and Statistics Department, 2017. Thematic Household Survey Report – Report No. 64. The publication reported the main results of the Thematic Household Survey conducted from April to July 2016.

the quality of e-Government services.

Young people are the e-generation. Internet and technology applications are an irreplaceable part of their daily lives. This research, making reference to the experiences of e-Government overseas, aimed to look into the performance of the HKSAR Government from the perspective of young people and offer recommendations for improvement. It was hoped that the governance of the HKSAR Government could be benefited as well.

In conducting this research, data was collected for analysis through an online survey of 648 members of the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, aged 18 to 34, in March 2018. In February and March 2018, five parallel discussion groups were conducted with a total of 30 young people. Interviews with 4 experts and academics were also conducted during the same period of time.

Main Discussion

- 1. Effective e-Government services bring benefits to both the government and citizens. In face of challenges in global development, the HKSAR Government needs a greater determination to further develop and improve its e-Government operation.**

Experiences from overseas show effective e-Government services can help build a positive image of the government, enabling it to gain public trust. The recent emergence of ITC, meanwhile, has improved the quality of life for people.

Of the 648 youths who participated in the online survey, more than one third (35.7%) believed that effective e-Government services could increase their interaction with the government. Of the 30 young participants from the parallel focus group discussions, some believed that digital public services could help improve both the efficiency and transparency of administration.

The HKSAR Government has implemented e-services for years. The related infrastructure facilities have been properly built, and citizens are accustomed to the use of electronic devices. However, the development of e-Government still faces many challenges. Hong Kong's ranking in international surveys on e-Government has been mediocre in recent years, despite placing well in the 2000s.

A number of reports from international organizations have pointed out that the main goal of e-Government is to provide more effective and convenient services, and to narrow the distance between the public and the government. The HKSAR Government should determinedly seize the advantages that Hong Kong has embraced so as to overcome the difficulties on the road of e-Government development.

2. e-Government is a continuous process that involves the effort of all government departments. A pro-active and influential structural leadership is crucial for the success of seamless e-Government services.

e-Government requires the collaboration of all departments within the government. It implies that a whole-of-government approach is imperative so that services can be effectively implemented and launched. In many cases, the unit(s) responsible for e-Government report their work directly to the highest managerial level. In the UK and Singapore, for example, this is the Prime Minister or the Cabinet. Some units actively interact with society through emerging technologies to increase public awareness and interest in using the services.

In Hong Kong, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) is affiliated under policy bureaux. Its responsibilities include promoting the development of e-Government and providing technical support to various policy bureaux and departments. Meanwhile, an E-government Steering Committee (EGSC), chaired by the Financial Secretary, was established in 2004. It is responsible for approving the strategic direction of the e-Government programme, setting targets for outcome, benefits and utilisation of such projects. A report by the Audit Commission in 2009 considered that there was a need for the OGCIO to convene EGSC meetings regularly to discuss progress and provide the

OGCIO with the necessary strategic direction and support.

Against this background, this study made enquiries to the relevant departments of the SAR Government about the member composition of the EGSC in recent years. The enquiries also sought information about the number of meetings the EGSC had held in the past few years. However, at the time of publication of this research report these enquiries had not yet been replied to.

This study found that 30.1% of respondents were unhappy about the insufficient linkage of government department websites. A majority (77.2%) of respondents believed that any arrangements that could make more citizens aware of the choices of the services would be helpful in improving the effectiveness of e-Government services.

A pro-active and influential structural leadership is crucial for the success of seamless e-Government services. This also helps improve the transparency of the overall planning of the government in terms of e-Government development. It is worth considering how to strengthen the co-ordination of the e-Government of the SAR for a better leadership.

- 3. Users are the core target of e-Government services. The HKSAR Government should effectively reflect users' experiences when it comes to measure the performance of e-services. This could promote public monitoring and assist the Government to provide services that better meet the needs and expectations of the users.**

There is a global trend that governments from different regions have applied the latest technologies to strengthen the influence of user experience in designing services, including grasping users' needs and expectations.

There are currently more than 50 government departments within the HKSAR Government. This study found that less than 10 of them had arranged user opinion surveys to collect users' feedback regarding their experiences visiting the department website.

Regarding the performance evaluation of e-services, information

provided by the HKSAR Government in replying enquiries to this study showed that the mechanisms for measuring e-Government performance were mainly focused on cost effectiveness, whether the projects could be completed on schedule, and whether services had fulfilled specified requirements. Perceptions and experiences of the users might be overlooked.

From a user-centric perspective, the HKSAR Government should explore indicators that effectively reflect the performance of e-services. On the one hand, this could strengthen public monitoring. On the other, it could help the Government to better understand the needs and expectations of the users given the ever-changing information technology world.

- 4. The youth are the e-generation. They use e-Government services with particular emphasis on speed and interaction. Young people are the main users of future e-Government services. The HKSAR Government should pay more attention to their opinions.**

The majority of respondents used e-Government services but their comments and evaluations of the services were not remarkable.

Over 70% of respondents (71.1%) had used government online services in the 12 months prior to the survey. Of them, 46.8% were satisfied with the services. A considerable proportion (44.1%) of respondents said that they would give priority to other search engines in case they needed to search for government information.

In a survey conducted by the Singaporean government recently, however, 95% of citizens reported being satisfied with local e-Government services. It seems that the HKSAR government still has much room for improvement.

Young people from the parallel focus group discussions stated that they appreciated the provision of prompt, real-time information from the government. They were, however, dissatisfied with the fact that most of the government's online customer services remained on the phone or e-mail, which are time-consuming and ineffective from their point of view.

Young people are accustomed to using the Internet and electronic devices. This research, however, found that a considerable proportion of respondents did not use government e-services, and the satisfaction rating of the respondents regarding the services was also not outstanding. This deserves the attention of the HKSAR Government.

Respondents had expectations of improving e-Government services.

Over 60% of respondents believed that raising the standard of the government's e-services to that of the levels provided by the commercial sector (65.3%), or allowing citizens to have more opportunity of participation such as providing feedback (61.4%), would help improve the quality of e-Government services. A considerable number of participants (39.4%) believed that the most important criteria for e-Government services were simplicity and user-friendliness.

Young people are the main users of future government e-services; they also have expectations that the services could match the quality provided by the commercial sector. To keep pace with the times, the HKSAR Government should take the initiative and make reference to the latest e-services developments and technologies used by businesses, and co-operate with the relevant organizations at home and globally. This could, on the one hand, broaden the mind-set of the government, and on the other keep public services constantly improving. It is also hoped that more young people could be encouraged to use the services.

- 5. Open data could help stimulate creativity of the public. Yet, respondents had reservations that Hong Kong could become a smart city. The HKSAR Government should cultivate an atmosphere of data openness in the society.**

Many governments all over the world have established online open data platforms, and have encouraged the concept of public and private partnership in providing public services. Yet, Hong Kong's ranking in the Global Open Data Index has lagged behind its neighbours in recent years. This study noted that only around 3.5% of the current total data

set available at the data.gov.hk was provided by the public and the private sectors, apart from that of the government departments.

A majority (71.7%) of respondents believed that more open data could help improve the quality of e-services provided by the HKSAR Government. However, about one third (31.7%) were not confident in Hong Kong developing into a smart city in the next five years – double the percentage of those who showed confidence in it doing so (15.5%).

The development of a smart city is the goal of the current HKSAR Government; data openness is the foundation for building a smart city. The Government should actively create an atmosphere that is conducive to data sharing and encourage all sectors of the society, including government departments, enterprises, businesses, and private organizations, to further open up data. The collective wisdom accumulated from all sectors could promote effective public services and provide important reference for tackling social problems.

Open data would inevitably involve issues such as privacy, security and fairness. It requires the collective ambition of the community to strive for balance and consensus. If the community could take a step forward and open up data that is closely related to peoples' lives, there is a much higher chance that Hong Kong could develop into a data-driven smart city.

- 6. With the rapid advancements in technology, it is more effective for government departments to improve the ability of employees to grasp these emerging technologies. The HKSAR Government should actively strengthen ITC training for civil servants.**

With the rapid pace of advancement in ITC, many governments have begun to conduct regular assessments on manpower so that public services can keep pace with the ever-changing world as well as the expectations of the public.

Currently, the OGCIO, the Civil Service Training and Development Institute and various departments provide ITC-related training to civil

servants. However, it is not easy for the huge civil service system to effectively apply and use emerging technologies in the provision of services, given the fact that technology develops at such a tremendous speed nowadays.

The current HKSAR Government has proposed the establishment of a new Civil Service College to strengthen the training of civil servants in areas such as innovation and technology applications. The Government should seize this opportunity to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the manpower resources that are needed for the provision of high-quality public services. At the same time, the Government should make use of existing resources to strengthen the knowledge and application capabilities of civil servants in innovation and information technology.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, this study makes the following recommendations to improve government electronic services and release the potential capacity of e-Government for the HKSAR Government.

1. Establish a high-level of structural leadership for e-Government.

e-Government involves all policy bureaux and government departments. A pro-active and influential high-level structural leadership with clear terms of reference is crucial for the success of implementing effective e-Government services across the whole government. There is no subordination between the OGCIO and the various departments. The public also barely know anything about the EGSC chaired by the Financial Secretary.

This study suggests that the Government should establish a clear high-level structural leadership so as to make a clear commitment to the development of e-services, demonstrate strong will for leadership and execution, and to lead the entire government departments to develop e-services while increasing the transparency of the work.

On the other hand, an inter-departmental Steering Committee on Innovation and Technology, chaired by the Chief Executive, has been established. Given the fact that e-Government is closely related to the construction of a smart city, this study also suggests that the EGSC should be included as a task force for the above-mentioned committee to reduce any possible overlap of work.

2. Introduce user-centric elements for e-services performance indicators.

Citizens are the core target of e-Government services. With reference to practice overseas, this study suggests that the Government should introduce elements that reflect the perceptions and experiences of users for formulating performance indicators. The elements should cover three basic areas: Digital Take-up, Completion Rate, and User Satisfaction. Regular reports of these indicators are also recommended.

3. Conduct regular data collection to understand the needs and expectations on the public regarding e-Government services in an ever-changing world.

At present, the user satisfaction survey conducted by the Efficiency office of the SAR Government about the overall performance of public services fails to provide a separate result on the public's rating of e-services. Besides, few government departments have arranged user opinion surveys on their websites for collecting feedback.

With reference to experiences overseas, this study recommends that the Government conduct regular data collection on the needs and expectations on the public regarding e-Government services, including opinion surveys and user experience research. This could be a valuable source of reference for service improvement in future.

Young people are the main users of future e-Government services. This study suggests that the Government should invite young people to exchange opinions and offer ideas to improve e-Government

services. This could, on the one hand, provide opportunities for young people to exercise their creative potential. On the other, it would increase youth participation and enrich their experiences in using the services.

4. Develop Chatbot customer services for e-Government services.

This study noted that the current telephone and e-mail inquiry services provided by the HKSAR Government have failed to meet the needs of users. It is necessary to introduce more advanced customer services.

For the e-generation, instant and self-served online customer service seems to be more attractive. With reference to practice overseas, this study suggests that the Government should introduce Chatbot customer service. This could reduce the waiting time for public enquiries while handling and solving public enquiries in a more effective way.

5. Strengthen the training of civil servants in applying emerging technologies.

The HKSAR Government has proposed the establishment of a new Civil Service College to strengthen the training of civil servants in areas such as innovation and technology applications. This study suggests that the Government, through this upcoming College, should conduct a comprehensive assessment and planning of human resources necessary for the development of high-quality electronic services in the future, and strengthen cooperation with other organizations such as enterprises, institutions, and private organizations.

This study also suggests that the Government should strengthen the training of civil servants on emerging technologies. Areas such as data science, data analysis and application, user experience research and design thinking should be covered. It is hoped that this could enhance

the confidence and ability of civil servants to work with new technologies, given the fact that we are living in a digital world.