

The Making of Smart Government

By Monica S. Fernandez
Florida International University

The mobile technology boom is spreading like wildfire across many fronts. Mobile phones, for strictly personal use, are no longer the norm. The advent of more updated models and the need for more interactivity has increased the use of mobile phones in the workplace. Open data initiatives abound and the movement towards cities becoming “smart” is palpable. Although trust in government has continued to wane over the years, the desire to see a more active citizenry has led to a surge in mobile applications (apps). Apps are being used to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, accountability in government. The apps are beneficial to both local governments and its users. Yet there are limitations in the implementation of such apps that have led to hesitation in using apps in the public sector .

Mobile Applications

The two mobile applications for public sector use that I examine in this paper are SeeClickFix and MDT Tracker. I used Desouza & Bhagwatwar’s (2012) classification of open data applications (to identify five main aspects of the apps: the data source, goal, motivation, platform and range. For SeeClickFix, the data source is *user feed* because it is helping “...government agencies learn of problems with road, street lights, and other public infrastructure” (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012, p. 126). The goal of the app is opinion seeking, problem identification, problem resolution, and information access/creating awareness. The motivation is to solve social issues. The apps platform is a Web based as well as Mobile device based. The range of the app’s service is local(citywide).

MDT Tracker is a mobile app that provides up-to-date, real-time information on the public transportation system in Miami-Dade. The data source is government data because it aims to “...improve efficiency of public transportation services provided by the government...” (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012, p. 126). The goal of the app is information access. The motivation is to solve social issues. The platform is a Web based app and Mobile device based app. The range of the app is local (citywide).

Benefit of Apps: Government and User Perspectives

SeeClickFix is very interactive and allows the citizens to take pictures, upload them to the app, and notify the local government responsible for the issue. The user can comment and make updates as to whether the issue persists or has been resolved. It streamlines the workflow and affords the community residents to be engaged and be heard. Local governments can utilize the app to stay abreast of issues in their towns, cities, counties, etc. Increasing efficiency and restoring the public trust in how governments operate is becoming more evident with the implementation and follow-through that apps like SeeClickFix provide.

MDT Tracker is essential for residents of Miami-Dade County who frequently use the public transportation system. The app allows one to find a bus route, a Metrorail stop, and the accurate times for each service, all of which is incredibly valuable for citizens in the present fast-paced environment. Accessing the information is simple and it is user-friendly: each section is titled and when clicked, it opens up the appropriate map or route information. Through the app, the government shows its desire in wanting to make the lives of the citizens smoother and more

seamless. The days of a paper bus schedule or looking up at the signs at a metro rail stop are long in the past. The modern convenience of having a smart phone that can easily access such information is making the public transportation system in Miami-Dade more navigable.

Prospects and Limitations: The Making of Smart Local Governments

As affirmed in Desouza & Bhagwatwar (2012), an advantage to providing information and identifying problems is that "...they can expedite the process of problem resolution by making concerned authorities aware of a problem when people find and report that problem (p. 111). The concept of a "smart" local government is on the rise much in part to the boom in technology and the citizens' desire for involvement. Engaging the community is of utmost importance to every government leader as the residents are the customers who will directly have an impact on whether or not some elected officials get elected. Advancing social causes generates interest and buy-in from those who live in the municipalities. The complaints often shared by residents are that they are unaware of how they can get involved or how they can stay informed. Mobile apps have given a rise to information, problem identification and resolutions which "...assists government authorities in doing their work more efficiently, but also helps citizens realize they can help solve social issues just by using an application on their phone" (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012, p. 112). The smart-city concept is worldwide and is the way of the future. "The ultimate vision is a city that is hyper efficient, easy to navigate, and free of waste- and which is constantly collecting data to help handle emergencies, disasters, and crime" (Humphries, 2013).

Critics of having such public, data-driven, up-to-the-minute information readily available hold that it should be implemented steadily and while keeping in mind the effects of changing the climate of policies and altering the way cities are run for the generation to come. A limitation with the apps' data source being user feeds is that "the success and effectiveness of applications in this category largely depend on two factors: (a) how well people are providing information feeds to the application and (b) how efficiently the applications communicate with the government-provided interface to direct the user feeds to the appropriate government agencies" (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012, p. 111).

Ultimately, the public has to be aware of the pervasiveness of the emerging forms of gathering data. Whether it is from surveillance cameras, or smart-technology meters, information is readily available to be disseminated and interpreted. The implementation of such technology and the aggregate use of the information are up for debate by some, but it is time to adapt because the technology era is here to stay. Mobile apps have made the accessibility of information easier and will undoubtedly improve over time. In my opinion, people should learn to use the apps because it will be how we stay in tune to our local government operations and services and it is proving to be a valuable medium in allowing citizens to be connected.

References

Desouza, K. C., & Bhagwatwar, A. (2012). Citizen Apps to Solve Complex Urban Problems.

Journal of Urban Technology, 19(3), 107-136.

GovLoop (2013). Making mobile matter: Implementing your mobile enterprise strategy. *The*

GovLoop Guide.

Humphries, C. (2013, May 19). The too-smart city. *The Boston Globe*.