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The e-Citizen Charter as an Instrument to boost e-Government

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Abstract: The aim of the Dutch e-Government policy is to improve information exchange, service delivery and interactive participation by introducing a new partnership between citizen and government. To help citizens in their new role, an instrument has been developed: the so called e-Citizen Charter. This is a code of conduct consisting of 10 quality requirements. This charter was developed by the e-Citizen Programme, and has been adopted as a standard by the Dutch government. It is the guiding principle in a national convention to stimulate e-Government, signed by representatives of all tiers of government. The national interoperability framework also states the charter as a goal. Moreover the charter is being applied for awarding good practices. By stating their rights in a concise way, the charter empowers citizens. Thus external pressure can be build up by customers, which will stimulate existing internal drivers for change. By creating awareness and promoting take up, the charter will boost e-Government.

Keywords: e-Citizen, e-Participation, e-Government, e-Democracy

1. Introduction

The aim of the Dutch e-Government policy is to improve information exchange, service delivery and interactive participation by introducing a new partnership between citizen and government. This is to be achieved by giving more responsibility and choice to citizens. As far as the Dutch cabinet is concerned, the required empowerment is being supported by ICTs. To help citizens in their new role, an instrument has been developed: the so called e-Citizen Charter. [1] This paper describes the creation of the charter and the role it fulfils in Dutch e-Government policy.

2. Objectives

The use of citizen charters originates from the UK, where they were introduced in the 1980s to safeguard the quality of privatized services. Nowadays, some Dutch municipalities use citizen charters or service standards. Most of these charters confine themselves to service delivery. They describe quality standards for information provision, waiting periods, accessibility or the service itself. Citizen charters do not pay much attention to other aspects of government like politics, regulation, law enforcement and the development of public services. Another limitation of these existing charters is that they ignore the development of e-Government practices. General quality standards for service delivery are not always suitable for the particular opportunities and difficulties of online service delivery. Probably, this applies also for online political participation and other online contacts with government.

The development of an e-Citizen Charter is rather new. Even in countries that walk in front of e-Government developments (according to benchmark-studies: Singapore, Canada and the Scandinavian countries) citizen charters on the quality of e-Government could not be found. Neither in the private sector are there any appealing examples of citizen charters for online services. Insurance companies, banks, telecom providers, internet service

providers and other e-business corporations often have a code of conduct, but this never proclaims quality standards. Surprisingly, most rules and regulations concern the customer's behaviour and are hardly about the conduct of the business or organization. [2]

Unlike former citizen's charters, the present charter is deliberately written from the citizens' perspective. It is user centred, addresses the major e-Government topics and consists of quality requirements for digital contacts including both citizen's rights as well as governmental responsibilities. This is not to say that a citizen has no duties. A citizen is not only a customer of services, but also a subject of law, a user of provisions and a participant in policy-making. The charter is meant for both citizen and government. It allows citizens to call their government to account for the quality of digital services. Government can use the charter to examine external quality of its public performance.

3. Methodology

The e-Citizen Charter is first of all based on research into existing quality systems and several surveys of citizen's expectations. With the help of Tilburg University, national and international views were gathered. The findings were consolidated and presented for public scrutiny in 2004. At the beginning of 2005, a version 1.0 of the charter was introduced. On the basis of the many comments and suggestions received, an improved version 2.1 has been drafted at the end of 2005.

The e-Citizen Charter has from the start been conceived of as model to be further developed via an open procedure. This was done by publishing it as a workbook that invites thinking, instead of a manual that should only be studied. The current personal workbook (which is available in several formats, including an online version) allows the owner to write down his or her remarks and criticism. The contributions of about 500 persons from different backgrounds have been used to create version 2.1. An online text is to be consulted via www.burger.overheid.nl/burgerservicecode.

4. Description

The charter deals with the 10 major topics of e-Government. For each topic a quality requirement has been formulated as a right of a citizen on the one hand, and a corresponding obligation of government on the other hand. Each standard is explained and illustrated with examples. [3] Moreover a (provisional) checklist has been made up in order to measure whether or not this standard is actually met.

1. Choice of Channel

As a citizen I can choose for myself in which way to interact with government. Government ensures multi channel service delivery, i.e. the availability of all communication channels: counter, letter, phone, e-mail, Internet.

Explanation: In the modern world, the website has become the real "shop window" of an organisation. Even for government organisations it is true that their digital office gets more visitors than the physical one. Accordingly, attention is rightly paid to the development of electronic contacts (e-mail, internet). However, this should not detract from other, more traditional channels. The reason for this is not only because some people are not familiar with the technology, as anybody can need personal help in certain circumstances, but also because grabbing the phone sometimes is more practical than starting your computer.

It is a matter of principle that the choice of channel is the prerogative of the customer. Commercial service providers like banks and insurance companies have rightly understood that this is what their customers expect. That is why they have discontinued their policy of phasing out physical shops, after having persuaded large numbers clients to shift to Internet banking. Likewise government bodies should introduce smart ways of channel management. An example could be visiting the elderly in their homes with a laptop computer to help them fill out application forms.

Checklist: Does the website explain how to get in contact? Are guidelines published how e-mail is dealt with? Is receipt of e-mail confirmed? Is customer relationship management operational (e.g. when you phone, do they know about a letter you recently sent?)

2. Transparent Public Sector

As a citizen I know where to apply for official information and public services. Government guarantees one-stop-shop service delivery and acts as one seamless entity with no wrong doors.

Explanation: When a citizen needs information, a permit or a subsidy, he is supposed to find his way to the competent government body. But citizens tend to think of government as one concern and do not want to be bothered by administrative divisions and segmented differences. Even skilled people get lost in the bureaucratic wilderness. Internet enables seamless government, i.e. administrations working virtually together without losing their autonomy and identity. Such a one-stop-service delivery is possible provided that politicians and officials are prepared to change from a supply focus to a demand orientation.

A good example is the Fully Integrated National Database (called FIND). This is an integrated catalogue of public services, which gives descriptions and access to all of the existing 2500 products of national, regional and local government. The next step being undertaken is combining several products of different administrations into one new integrated service, such as a geographic permit (instead of separate building, spatial planning and environmental permits). Likewise the combination of digital maps of several scales can create a so-called "What is allowed where" map which gives access to relevant regulations in the field of spatial planning. Another good practice is a single call centre, accessible in multi channel ways, for either directly rendering the required service or referral to the competent agency.

Checklist: Is an integrated services catalogue accessible? Are combined or integrated applications for permits possible? Is there a single phone number or call centre? Are related organisations linked to or is referral information given when applying for services, which are delivered by other agencies?

3. Overview of Rights and Duties

As a citizen I know which services I am entitled to under which conditions. Government ensures that my rights and duties are at all times transparent.

Explanation: Each citizen is supposed to know the law, but in everyday life it is not at all easy to be sure what your duties and rights are. That is why lots of citizens do not get what they are entitled to, i.e. a housing grant. In an area like social security there exists a jungle of regulations and institutions in which people easily might get lost. This problem increases in those instances where collective services are privatised and citizens are forced to make individual choices (i.e. in the field of pensions).

Digital government can lower thresholds by way of one-stop-shop models, clustering services around life events, and so on. A further step is introducing a personalised Internet page "MyGovernment.nl", containing personal data and information about one's own transactions with administrative units of government.

A recent survey by the e-Citizen Programme concluded that people in the Netherlands are very much interested in this kind of service, provided that their personal data are stored in a safe way and that they themselves can decide in which cases this information is to be used. It has been called an e-file with access to a secure digital vault.

Checklist: Is information given according to life events or target groups? Is there a possibility to tailor general information to your personal needs? Are "What-If"- searches available?

4. Personalised Information

As a citizen I am entitled to information that is complete, up to date and consistent. Government supplies appropriate information tailored to my needs.

Explanation: Simply converting paper bureaucracy into digital bureaucracy will not satisfy many people.

On the contrary, it emphasises the very problem of accessibility. Public information should be available in several forms. First of all, the basic information in a democratic society (like laws, regulations and proceedings) should be digitally available in full text. As of 2007, in the Netherlands the ordinary method of official publication will be the digital way. The central portal www.overheid.nl provides access to all government agencies and their services. Interestingly, the Treaty of Aarhus stipulates that government publish environmental information actively in a digital form.

Apart from distributing digitally published original documents, e-Government makes it possible to shift from a supply driven way of information provision to a demand oriented method. By registering certain profiles, information can be distributed in a personalised way (i.e. according to one's own criteria or needs). Several municipalities are introducing the system of subscribing to local information on the basis of a given topic or zip code. Government information should be trustworthy. A disclaimer stating that the provider cannot be held responsible for mistakes or omissions is not acceptable from the point of view that public information should be accurate and up to date at all times.

Checklist: Can one subscribe to a personalised information service? Are regular customers given preferential treatment? Is it possible to check and correct one's own personal data?

5. Convenient Services

As a citizen I can choose to provide personal data once and to be served in a proactive way. Government makes clear what records it keeps about me and does not use data without my consent.

Explanation: The complaint that is most often heard is that citizens have to supply the same data time and again. The citizen in fact is forced into the role of an (underpaid) mailman, running from one counter to another (as well as having to wait in line). By combining data and converting many separate databases into a limited number of so called authentic registers, it should no longer be necessary to fill in forms with much of the same particulars. However, this will only be possible if an organisation is ready to apply electronic customer (citizen) relationship management and workflow management.

A first step in this direction is supplying web forms that can be electronically returned. Next is sending pre filled forms, containing data already known by the agency, which can be completed if necessary and digitally signed. This kind of self-service is both reducing mistakes and saving time. The Inland Revenue in several countries is an example.

A final step is proactive service delivery. In this case the service is rendered on the basis of known data, without a citizen having to ask for these services (provided he agrees). An important prerequisite is that procedures are transparent and people can easily find out what data is stored by government, and for what purpose. A website describing all sorts of exchanges between government agencies will be operational as of January 1st, 2006 (in connection with introducing a unified citizen number).

Checklist: Are web forms available to file applications for permits? Is making choices supported by decision-making software? Is it possible to check one's own personal data and correct mistakes?

6. Comprehensive Procedures

As a citizen I can easily get to know how government works and monitor progress. Government keeps me informed of procedures I am involved in by way of tracking and tracing.

Explanation: Even well educated citizens who know their way around in government, can get lost in the bureaucratic wilderness. Many times procedures for registration or application are utterly incomprehensible or unnecessarily complicated. Therefore, by providing insight as to which steps have to be taken and how decision-making is organised, government might enable better understanding and inspire trust. In commercial services the principle of tracking and tracing has proven to be very successful (ordering books, buying tickets on line, sending parcels, and so on). It prevents extra phone calls, saves time (and money) and enhances consumer satisfaction.

These procedures offer the possibility to make appointments on line or update entries in databases. Such a kind of self service can very well be introduced in government procedures When

the full process is transparent, it does not seem to take as much time as when government merely is a black box. Transparency not only enhances citizen satisfaction. In countries with a less stable political system, web enabled services along open and transparent procedures prevent or reduce the risk of irregularities, bribery and corruption. Examples of good practices are digital procurement and customs declarations on line.

Checklist: Is there a clear mission statement or organisation policy online? Is a database of legal or contractual decisions online? Is tracking & tracing available when filing an application?

7. Trust and Reliability

As a citizen I presume government to be electronically competent. Government guarantees secure identity management and reliable storage of electronic documents.

Explanation: The shift of contacts from traditional to virtual ways implies that we become more and more dependent on the availability and continuity of electronic networks. While it is taken for granted that public authorities are responsible for roads, such a responsibility is not usual as far as the digital highway is concerned (even now that this is a real alternative). In electronic banking a certain percentage of fraud is accepted as an inevitable phenomenon and actually compensated for collectively. However, fraud or abuse in public matters (imagine electronic voting), is not acceptable and certainly should not be treated lightly.

Continuity and trust are to be assured. A recent so called DDOS-attack on Dutch government websites was treated light-heartedly. After protests by citizens, action was taken to remedy this. Next year in the Netherlands the digital signature will be rolled out nationwide, so care has to be taken that the digital exchange of critical information is secure. Government organisations and civil servants should be trained to treat digital files carefully. This also holds for knowledge about what to do against hacking, phishing and spam. A government agency monitors and alerts (www.govcert.nl). Finally, digital longevity should be part and parcel of workflow management and archiving.

Checklist: Does the organisation state a clear privacy statement? Is a digital signature operational? Is it clear which measures are taken to prevent abuse of data?

8. Considerate Administration

As a citizen I can file ideas for improvement and lodge complaints. Government compensates for mistakes and uses feedback information to improve its products and procedures.

Explanation: A complaint should be considered as an advice which you don't have to pay for. A learning organisation uses mistakes to prevent them next time. It is not only that a citizen has the right to be taken seriously; customer friendliness also helps to improve performance. However, thinking and organising from the perspective of a customer is still a major culture change for the public sector. Because government lacks the discipline of the market which forces business to act when circumstances change, other incentives are necessary.

A first step is a digital complaints procedure that lowers barriers compared to submitting complaints in writing. Quality charters are another instrument. Unfortunately only a very small number of agencies do apply a quality charter. Moreover, quality charters deal mostly with quantitative issues, such as reducing response time or waiting time. Preventing waiting in line altogether by issuing services on line is a more sophisticated satisfier. A direct way of getting feedback is developing new interaction designs for services that incorporate a complaints procedure. Although this might lower the threshold for complaints, handling the possible larger quantities is easier done electronically.

Checklist: Are service levels clearly stated? Is it possible to file complaints electronically? Is an ombudsman instituted?

9. Accountability and Benchmarking

As a citizen I am able to compare, check and measure government outcome. Government actively supplies benchmark information about its performance.

Explanation: For many collective services (like pensions, job search, health care, energy supply) that are being privatised, the market mechanism only works when people have the information to make choices themselves. To be accountable to clients, public feedback mechanisms need to be in place. In commercial services a number of methods to compare products and prices are available. These should also become normal practice in the public sector, including information about quality and service in the form of consumer ratings. School report cards are an example to help parents to select education institutions. Nowadays this is done in the Netherlands to support the major privatising operation of health insurance and care.

Performance data also support a kind of citizens' role that is called horizontal checking. Instead of civil servants monitoring whether companies abide by the rules, private citizens having an interest can check for themselves in public registers whether a given company has the required permits or acts according to imposed limitations. Unfortunately this kind of vigilance has suffered because of the fear of terrorism and the accompanying focus on safety and security.

Checklist: Are performance indicators published? Are annual reports online? Does the organisation take part in relevant benchmark systems?

10. Involvement and Empowerment

As a citizen I am invited to participate in decision-making and to promote my interests. Government supports empowerment and ensures that the necessary information and instruments are available.

Explanation: E-Government is not only useful to improve service delivery, reduce administrative burdens and enhance internal efficiency. It also holds promises in matters of involvement and participation. The very methods that improve service delivery can surely be used to promote empowerment.

The successful Voting Assistant (www.stemwijzer.nl) helps voters to compare the election programmes of political parties and make a well-founded choice. Electronic voting could increase turnout at the polls. Chatting and blogging also can help to make the political process more transparent. However, the mere availability of instruments is no guarantee for actual use. Both government and citizens should imagine what it could add to their present relationship. Although citizens on the one hand seem to lose interest in party politics, they on the other hand explore collective action and new ways of lobbying via the internet. The Internet can be a platform to empower citizens. From this point of view bridging the digital divide remains a task for all of us.

Checklist: Are citizens invited to participate in decision-making? Can one register as a member for customer panels? Are weblogs published?

5. Developments

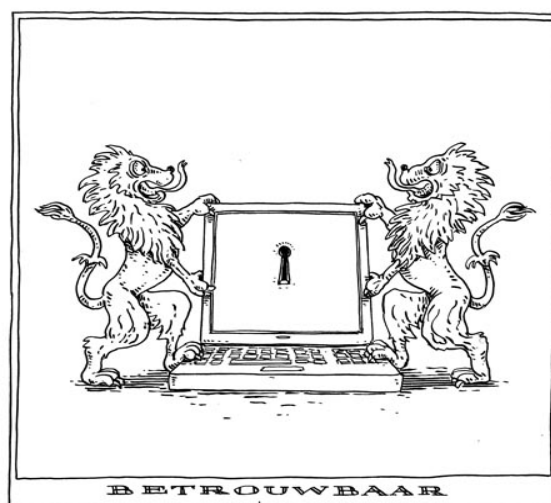


Diagram 1: Trust & Reliability

The charter has been developed by the e-Citizen Programme in the Netherlands. This is an independent platform that stimulates the development of e-government from the citizen's

point of view. To that end it involves citizens, advises government bodies and monitors progress. Apart from developing the e-Citizen Charter, it regularly conducts surveys with its own e-Citizen Panel and annually grants the e-Government Award for good practices. The programme is part of ICTU, the Dutch implementation organization for ICT and government. A Steering Committee representing citizen's interest groups supervises the proceedings. More information is to be found on www.burger.overheid.nl

In November 2005 the charter was presented to the Dutch Minister for Government Reform, who hailed it as a "gift" from citizens to government, which should serve as a reference model for all government bodies and agencies. [4] The e-Citizen Programme proclaimed 2006 as the Year of the e-Citizen Charter and distributed an illustrated Calendar 2006 nationwide.

Since then the charter has gradually gained more acceptance. The National Ombudsman has announced to adopt the charter as part of his evaluation principles. The charter is taken as a guiding principle in the so-called NORA (translated as: Netherlands Government Reference Architecture), which is the basis for national interoperability standards on e-Government. On the occasion of municipal elections in March 2006 it has been widely circulated in election programmes. Moreover on April 18th 2006 a national convention was signed by representatives of all tiers of government (state, provinces, municipalities and waterboards) to stimulate e-Government. The declaration agreed upon takes the e-Citizen Charter as the guiding principle for citizen centred government. [5] The convention was signed by the Minister of Government Reform, the Chairman of the Union of Provinces, the Chairman of the Union of Local Authorities and the Chairman of the Union of Waterboards. Subsequently the charter is going to be incorporated into a new Good Governance Programme for the public sector. Finally on April 26th the annual Dutch e-Government Award 2006 was given to the city of Amsterdam, because it applied the charter the best. All 10 nominees have committed themselves explicitly to the charter, amongst whom the Chairman of the Dutch Senate, the Minister of Health and Care, the Mayor of the city of The Hague. EU Commissioner Wallström, one of the nominees (for the website Europe Direct) also expressed support for the charter [6].

6. Results

Over a one and a half year time period, the charter has become a kind of "ten commandments for e-Government" which cover the whole range of contacts [7]. These 10 requirements can be divided in four categories: requirement number 1 deals with the basic principle of access; requirements number 2, 3, 4 deal with information; requirements number 5, 6, 7 deal with interaction; and requirements number 8, 9, 10 deal with participation. A recent survey in the Netherlands [8] concluded that from the citizens' point of view the top three were: number 2 (transparency), 7 (trust) and 5 (convenience).

The charter summarizes a general future view on government as a whole. It is not meant to dictate strict conformity but should be adaptable to different government levels and policy areas. Administrations should decide themselves which requirements they can meet now and which they will meet in the future. Citizens will request why this is the case. By building up external pressure from customers, the charter can stimulate internal drivers for change. It creates awareness and helps take up, and thus can boost e-Government. At present the charter is not mandatory, but is based on the principle: Comply or Explain. In the foreseeable future, the charter might be turned into a benchmarking system or even a quality mark.

Apart from lectures, articles and interviews in the Netherlands [9, 10, 11, 12], the charter was promoted via international meetings: Sevilla (7th Framework Research Programme, October 2005), Seoul (Global Symposium on eGovernment, November 2005),

Hannover (Abschlusstagung Interaktiver Landschaftsplanung, April 2006) and Prague (MODINIS Interoperability workshop, April 2006).

7. Conclusions

Dutch e-Government policy stipulates that each government agency should have a service delivery charter by the end of 2008. The present charter aims to be a national standard for those quality charters. In its present form it is being adopted as such on the national level and the local level.

Although conceived of in the Netherlands, the Dutch e-Citizen Charter can easily be adapted and implemented in other countries. Internationally the idea of a charter attracts much attention, as many countries face the problem of rapid technological development of the one hand and stagnating use of electronic services on the other hand. An e-charter, by clarifying mutual ambitions and expectations, can help to increase awareness and drive take up of e-channels. At present there are no similar initiatives, with the exception of a project by Eurocities (www.eurocities.org). However this has the form of unilateral declaration by cities only.

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