

Towards User-centred eGovernment

– Understanding Potential Demand for Online Public Services –

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The challenge

Arguably, the development of front-office eGovernment in the EU area has until now been primarily guided by supply-side factors, in spite of governments' claims that they will use the Internet to improve service provision and to better meet their citizens' requirements. In practice, technological possibilities rather than user needs have determined all too often the design of public online services. This contrasts sharply with the European Commission's request that – in the light of its vision of “ambient intelligence” – the “user, the individual has to be placed at the centre of future developments for an inclusive knowledge-based society for all”.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that the large majority of eGovernment applications are not evaluated *ex-post* with regard to impacts on users and other stakeholders, as the KEeLAN project has found out in a recent study (2003). Thus, the final declaration of last year's EISCO conference stressed that “currently there is too little emphasis on the importance of measuring results [...]. This is a major obstacle to improvement that administrations should immediately face” (EISCO 2003).

At the root of these problems lies what social researchers call *technological determinism*, which is the wide-spread tendency to assume that certain social outcomes are in some way inherent in a technology. A determinist view implies that all that has to be done is to develop and “unleash” a certain technology in order to make its potentials for improving human life come true. It can, however, easily be shown that technological determinism is a myth and that technology, while *enabling* certain beneficial developments, is in no way a *sufficient* condition for these (see e.g. Robins & Webster 1999). Rather, society has to devise policies which effectively strive to use technology to the largest possible benefit of all.

There is, thus, no reason to be complacent about the high degree of satisfaction which users show with eGovernment services (see CEC 2003a). Other research has confirmed that users tend to be satisfied with online public services: Research in BISER (2003b) found that over 90% of citizen and over 80% of business users indicate that they would use the online channel for e-government service provision again. At the same time, however, a large percentage of *potential* users of e-government still prefer to access government services through traditional channels (mostly face-to-face). There is evidence that a positive attitude towards online government services exists among current users, while non-users at the same time are totally dismissing their usefulness. Such polarisation between users who are enthusiastic about the advantages of e-government and non-users who refuse to even try e-government services (what the study calls “e-government refusers”) can only be seen as a call for action.

Such findings are of special relevance because the main services of public interest (which, of course, need to be defined) *must* be accessible to every citizen. Additionally, for many services there exists a public interest in a high degree of usage (e.g. education), which goes much beyond mere accessibility but involves questions of motivation.

What, then, must be done to better address the diversity of user needs and preferences in the development of online public services?

1.2 Background of this paper

This paper is based on research undertaken as part of the **eUSER** project. Funded by the European Commission's IST programme, eUSER is a major new research and dissemination project which seeks to provide solid evidence about users' real needs regarding eGovernment offers, as well as providing data about attitudes and take-up levels of current public online services. The project addresses generic user-related issues and is currently developing a globally accessible repository of evidence-based knowledge, methods and best practice examples. eUSER will pursue an extensive programme of active knowledge translation, transfer and dissemination, targeted especially at developers of online public services inside and outside of the sixth Framework Programme of EU-funded research and technological development. In addition to existing knowledge and approaches, the knowledge base will be supplemented by novel data which will be generated by means of representative population surveys (demand side) to be carried out in most old and all new Member States, and through comparative analyses of readiness to address user aspects of public eServices in each Member State (supply side). eUSER will run until the end of 2005.

This paper presents first findings from initial steps undertaken in the project, i.e. the analysis of the state-of-the-art in research on user needs and methods. It draws extensively on results from two recent surveys, namely the SIBIS¹ and BISER² surveys which have produced representative data about attitudes to e-government, perceived barriers and current take-up rates in the population.

The **SIBIS** survey was conducted in two waves, the first taking place in April-May 2002 and covering all 15 EU Member States plus Switzerland and the US, using computer-aided telephone interviews (CATI). The population for this study was all persons aged 15 and over living in private households and speaking the respective national language(s). 11,832 interviews were successfully completed. Target households were selected at random in all countries, either by random dialling techniques such as permutation of final digits or by drawing a random sample from official sources. For the selection of the target person common random keys were applied in all countries except for the UK where quota were used. In two cases (Spain, the US), screening had to be directed towards male respondents towards the very end of the field in order to gain gender representativeness.

The second wave of SIBIS was conducted in January 2003 and covered the 10 Newly Associated States Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia. It made use of face-to-face interviews (CATI would not produce valid results because of low telephone penetration in households). The survey was co-ordinated and executed by NFO AISA Czech Republic, Prague. 10,379 interviews were successfully completed. Target households were selected at random in all countries, either by multistage stratified random-route sampling or by drawing a random sample from official sources. A geographical stratification was implemented beforehand. For the selection of the target person common random keys were applied in all countries, i.e. the next birthday method and the Kish method, except for Bulgaria where quota were used.

¹ See www.sibis-eu.org

² See www.biser-eu.com

The **BISER** survey was carried out at the regional level (NUTS 2), covering 28 out of the 211 NUTS 2 units in EU15. Regions were selected to cover the range of patterns of sectoral structure (“agricultural”, “manufacturing” and “services”, depending on the share of employment in each of the sectors) and economic power (as GDP per head) as well as Member States according to the distribution of population³. Within each region the sample was set up as a random probability sample which provides a sufficiently representative picture of the resident population (aged 15+). A minimum of 400 successful interviews were conducted in each region using CATI (11,369 in total). The survey provided a person sample (rather than a household sample) and was predominantly based on random dialling methods. Sampling in each Member States was carried out allowing for national differences regarding organisation of telephone number allocation and unlisted telephone numbers, and taking other national peculiarities into account which may require various strategies of random drawing.

It is important to note here that averages based on BISER data are not representative for the whole of the EU territory in a statistical sense. However, it has been checked that the sample is very similar to the EU average with regard to mean values for key socio-demographic variables⁴. This suggests that BISER averages for other indicators as well can be assumed to be reasonably close to EU15 averages.

2 ONLINE PUBLIC SERVICES

For the purpose of this paper (and the eUSER project in general), public services are defined as front-office services of public interest spanning three main areas: public administration, health, and learning. Furthermore, the focus is on the delivering these services using online computer connections, either entirely or at least in a significant part, while observing the relevant fact that these services maintain their inherent link to their traditional off line sphere. The relevant issues relate to the improvements that can be achieved in relation to the ‘traditional’ delivery of these services. These improvements can be twofold – in the first instance they can relate to the *efficiency* of service provision. Thus, eGovernment can provide a new impetus to address the ongoing challenge of revamping public administration in Europe in order to improve the quality of public services. In the second instance, these improvements can aim to improve the reach and reach-ability of these services by actively incorporating all relevant user needs as integrative part of the whole delivery process.

In the following, the discussion is limited to services provided by public administration for reasons of lack of space. The table below structures the whole area of government services

³ Regions that were surveyed: Salzburg (Austria), Liège (Belgium), Fyns Amt (Denmark), Väli-Suomi (Finland), Ile de France, Bretagne, Nord-Pas-De-Calais, Languedoc-Roussillon (all France), Darmstadt, Stuttgart, Braunschweig, Magdeburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (all Germany), Kentriki Makedonia (Greece), Border, Midland & Western (Ireland), Sicilia, Lazio, Toscana, Lombardia (all Italy), Friesland (Netherlands), Lisboa & Vale do Tejo (Portugal), Castilla- Leon, Cataluna (both Spain), Smaaland Med Oerna (Sweden), Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, Leicestershire, Greater Manchester, and Tees Valley and Durhams (all U.K.).

⁴ Population increase rate, young-age dependency ratio, old-age dependency ratio, GDP per inhabitant (in PPS), share of population with 3rd level education, share of employment in high-tech manufacturing, share of employment in high-tech services, share of employment in knowledge intensive services, unemployment rate, employment rate.

provided for citizens as end users. It distinguishes between different degrees of integration of ICTs in service provision, namely information, communication and transaction services.

Table 2-1: Application areas of electronic government services (source: PRISMA 2002)

	Information services	Communication services	Transaction services
Administration	Public service directory, guide to administrative procedures, public registers and databases	Email contact with civil servants, service providers, etc.	Electronic submission of forms, tax filings, applications for licences or permits
Political participation	Laws, parliamentary papers, political programmes, consultation documents, background information in decision making processes	Discussion dedicated to political issues, email contact with politicians	Referenda, elections, opinion polls, petitions
Everyday life	Information on work, housing, education, health, culture, transport, environment, etc.	Discussion dedicated to questions of everyday-life, jobs or housing bulletin boards, etc.	Ticket reservation, course registration, etc.

This paper does exclude from its discussion political participation, as applications in this area cannot adequately be understood as services provided to citizens, but rather as forms of interaction between stakeholders in society.

For the purpose of identifying specific public services which should be the focus of in-depth analysis in eUSER, the most important point of reference is the list of online public services which has been established for implementation of the eEurope 2005 Action Plan (see table below).

Table 2-2: eEurope common list of 12 basic public services to citizens (source: CEC 2000)

Public Services for Citizens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income taxes: declaration, notification of assessment • Job search services by labour offices • Social security contributions • Personal documents (passport and driver's licence) • Car registration (new, used and imported cars) • Application for building permission • Declaration to the police (e.g. in case of theft) • Public libraries (availability of catalogues, search tools) • Certificates (birth, marriage): request and delivery • Enrolment in higher education / university • Announcement of moving (change of address) • Health related services (e.g. interactive advice on the availability of services in different hospitals; appointments for hospitals.)

The list is a central component of the Commission's e-government strategy; its success is being benchmarked annually using supply-side data about online availability (CGEY 2003).

It is, however, problematic from the viewpoint of user-centred service provision for two interrelated reasons:

- Firstly, it can be shown that none of the 12 services is of major relevance for the majority of citizens. Data from BISER suggests that even those services from the list which are most frequently used concern only a minor share of the population: Much less than half of the EU population⁵ (37%) file an income tax declaration per year (of which 3 percentage points did so online in 2003); only 19% request personal documents such as a passport, driver's licence, birth certificate, etc. (1% online); and 14% register a car or other vehicle per year (1% online) – see table below.

Table 2-3: Private use of selected public services, overall and online (data source: BISER 2003)

<i>Citizen's use of the following services in last 12 months:</i>	Overall use (whether online or offline) in % of total population (N=11,369)	Online use in % of total population (N=11,369)	Online use in % of overall users
Filing in the income tax return	36.9	3.1	8.3 (N = 4,200)
Request for a passport, driver's licence, birth certificate or other personal document	19.3	1.2	6.4 (N = 2,199)
Registration of a car or other vehicle	13.9	0.5	3.9 (N = 1,574)
Any of these	52.1	4.5	8.7 (N = 5,919)

- Secondly, the focus on the supply side (while rightly reminding governments to get active) bears the danger that it is taken for granted that once “100 percent electronic service delivery” is reached, citizens will automatically switch to the online channel for the acquisition of these services. This would ignore the fact that the ability of citizens to engage with computer technology, and/or the willingness to do so for such purposes, varies greatly, as is discussed in the following chapter of this paper.

Recent evidence, especially from the United Kingdom (Cross 2002), suggests that online availability of the basic public services defined by eEurope alone is unlikely to lead to strong increases in demand for eGovernment. The UK government has set a target of getting all public services online by 2005, but this contrasts with low usage rates, according to a study by think-tank The Work Foundation (Curthoy and Crabtree 2003). The authors state that “while [the government] has already achieved about 70%, many of these services are not being used. [...] Some of the services government has to put online to meet its 100% target - from burial at sea to potato seed classification - begin to look a little peculiar when barely 3% of those eligible are filing their tax returns online” (Harwood 2003). They suggest that encouraging more citizens to use online services should be made the “unequivocal top priority” by the government in its e-government strategy, “even if this means downgrading the 2005 target for getting all services online” (ibid.).

⁵ aged 15 and older

For the analysis in eUSER, two observations follow from this:

- Firstly, it will be essential to select public services (or groups of services) for the analysis which are of high relevance for citizens, which means that they to some extent determine their satisfaction with public services in general. In short, eUSER needs to focus on services which really make a difference;
- Secondly, rather than focussing exclusively on individual services, eUSER needs look more generally at factors which influence demand for online services in general, and for public online services in particular.

3 MAPPING USERS

Starting point for the eUSER project is the observation that users of online public services are a highly differentiated group. This is often ignored as governments are planning the “roll-out” of public online services according to penetration rates as if they were trying to sell a soft drink. In reality the notion of an “average user” (as it has recently been applied by the UN for its study on the e-readiness and openness to e-participation of the world’s public administrations, see UN 2003) can be misleading because the main services of public interest *must* be accessible to everybody, not only the majority (or minority?) of users whose capabilities and preferences are well represented by the statistical “average”. For this reason, an analysis of barriers to uptake needs to shed more light on *types of users* and their specific characteristics, requirements and preferences.

For the purpose of our study the analysis carried out by Viherä (1999) is of special value. Viherä has introduced the concept of communication capabilities which comprises not only *access* to ICTs and *competence* in using them, but also the *motivation* for using them for certain purposes.

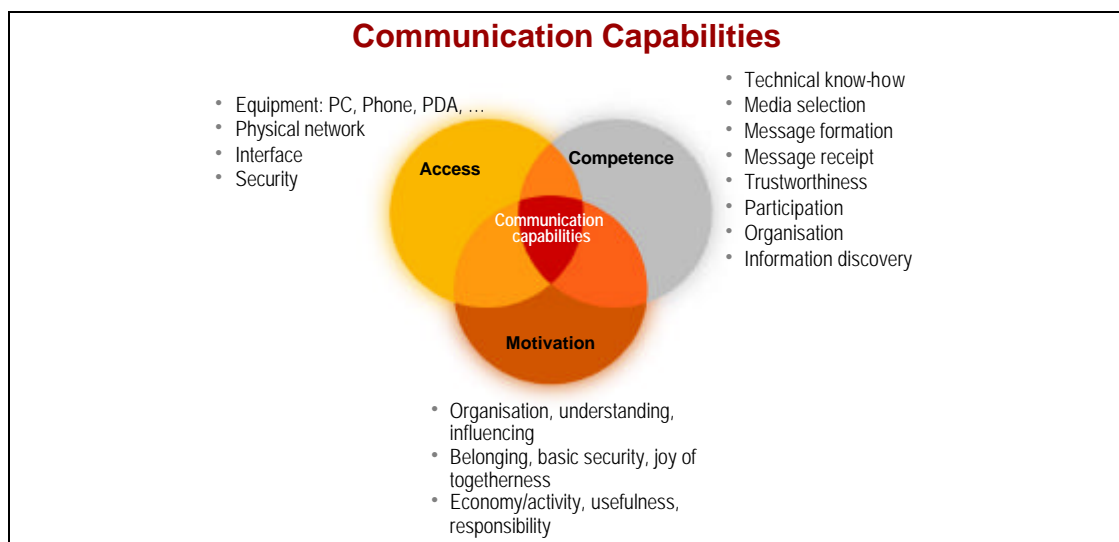


Figure 3-1: The concept of communication capabilities (Source: Viherä & Nurmela 2002:3)

In order to apply her notion of communication capabilities to usage of online public services, we need to understand what access, competence and motivation mean in the context of eGovernment applications. The following sections will also have a look at existing data in

order to show to what extent demand for online public services in the EU population is likely to meet expectations in the near future.

3.1 Differences in access

Using public online services requires access to the Internet for private usage. When looking at Internet access at home, and additionally taking into account awareness and usage of public Internet access points (such as in educational institutions, libraries, Internet cafés etc.), the SIBIS data quite clearly points out that access is currently far from ubiquitous⁶. This applies in particular when considering that many advanced online services require a broadband access to the Internet.

Table 3-1: Home access to the Internet and use of public Internet access points⁷ in the EU15 (data source: SIBIS 2002)

	NL	SE	DK	US	CH	UK	FI	IE	DE	LU	AT	IT	BE	ES	FR	PT	EL	EU15
Broadband	15	15	16	17	10	10	6	2	9	3	11	3	16	6	5	3	2	8
Narrow/ midband	48	36	37	35	31	23	35	30	30	37	26	24	14	15	17	12	10	24
Unknown access	10	15	11	12	20	25	17	21	11	10	10	13	11	10	8	6	5	13
No Internet access	28	34	36	37	40	42	42	47	50	50	53	59	60	70	70	79	83	56
<i>Thereof: PIAP users</i>	3	5	7	7	2	7	7	9	6	7	7	3	8	10	6	7	8	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 3-2: Home access to the Internet and use of public Internet access points⁸ in 10 Newly Associated States (data source: SIBIS 2003)

	SI	EE	CZ	PL	HU	LT	BG	SK	LV	RO	NAS10
Broadband	2	7	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Narrow/ midband	27	15	14	11	9	7	8	8	5	4	9
Unknown access	5	4	4	2	1	2	1	1	2	1	2
No Internet access	66	73	81	87	89	90	91	91	93	96	89
<i>Thereof: PIAP users</i>	4	12	7	5	4	13	9	10	12	8	7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

As is being discussed publically under the subject heading “digital divide”, there are considerable disparities between groups of the population with regard to access to and use of the Internet (see Hüsing 2003). The digital divide seems to mirror to a large extent more general social divides which exist in Member States, which means that the likelihood to be excluded from the fruits of economic wealth is highly correlated with the likelihood to be

⁶ With some degree of simplification we can assume that the main online services cannot easily be used from the workplace since the ability to use employer equipment for private usage is very limited in the majority of cases.

⁷ Including educational institutions, libraries, Internet cafés, etc.

⁸ Including educational institutions, libraries, Internet cafés, etc.

excluded from participation in what is commonly referred to as the Information Society (Kubicek 2003).

Differences in access can also be the result of special requirements of users (Roe 1995). This is because the ability to use online applications through the usual end devices (mainly personal computer) can be limited by functional restrictions. These are much more widespread in the EU than commonly assumed. A recent study (SeniorWatch 2002) found that 17% of the EU population in the age group 50-59 have severe functional restrictions with regard to either seeing, hearing or dexterity (see table below); the share is, of course, much higher in the older age groups⁹.

Table 3-3: Prevalence of functional restrictions as % of older population (source: SeniorWatch 2002)

	Age class				
	50 - 59	60 - 69	70 - 79	80+	total 50+
Vision problems					
severe problems	10.2	10.0	14.0	23.3	12.1
some problems	26.4	25.4	30.8	24.8	27.1
Hearing problems					
severe problems	3.0	3.8	5.8	12.5	4.7
some problems	18.5	28.0	31.8	36.2	26.2
Dexterity problems					
severe problems	6.0	10.0	12.6	15.8	9.7
some problems	17.4	18.1	20.4	27.3	19.2
Any of these					
severe problems	16.7	19.3	25.1	38.6	21.4
some problems	41.1	43.9	44.6	39.7	42.7
total: problems	57.7	63.2	69.7	78.3	64.1

Persons with functional restrictions may need special equipment to be able to access mainstream Internet-based services, such as enlarged keyboards and monitors, voice input/output, and so forth.

The same applies to ethnic minorities which do not feel confident in understanding the language in which public websites are penned. This is where access is interrelated with the second condition for communication capability, namely competence.

3.2 Differences in competence (skills)

To properly use online public services, citizens still need to have considerable computer and Internet skills. Endowment with these skills is highly correlated with usage experience, which means that skills are obtained mainly by doing rather than by upfront methods of learning (BISER 2003b). The share of citizens who are able to use online services can therefore be

⁹ Data for younger age classes is not available yet but will be collected by the eUSER project.

estimated by consulting usage statistics such as the one compiled by the SIBIS project (see below).

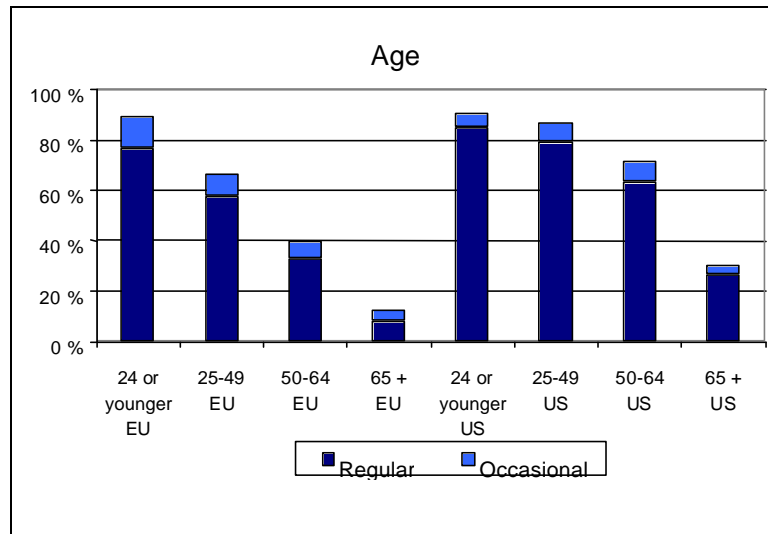


Figure 3-2: Share of Internet users in total population according to age group, in EU15 and the USA (data source: SIBIS 2002)

Closer analysis reveals that the willingness to use the Internet for formal transactions of the kind involved in many public online services does depend less on actual skill endowment than on the degree of *confidence* persons feel to have in using computer applications. The SIBIS digital literacy index measures confidence using 8 items related to online usage, including confidence in using a search engine to find information, in identifying the source of information provided on the Internet, in using e-mail and Internet chat-rooms, in creating a personal web page, in downloading and installing software onto a computer, and in understanding the content of websites written in English.

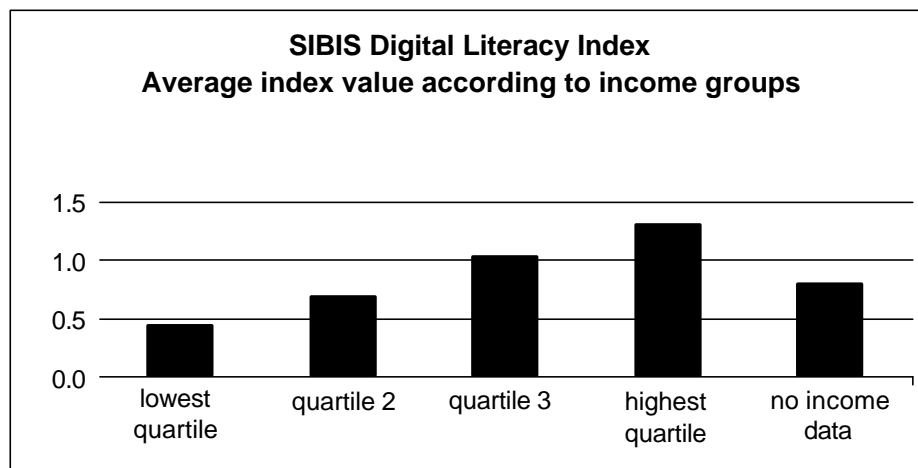


Figure 3-3: SIBIS digital literacy index according to household income (data source: SIBIS 2002)

The SIBIS compound digital literacy index aggregates replies to all of these items into a single measure with the maximum value of 3. As the figure above and the table below show, digital literacy is strongly correlated with household income and social grade.

Table 3-4: SIBIS digital literacy index according to social grade (data source: SIBIS 2002)

Social Grade of respondent (ESOMAR):	Digital literacy index	
	Value	N
Unskilled workers & manual employees	0.53	1332
Skilled workers and non-manual employees	0.99	1525
Well educated non-manual and skilled workers	1.29	1434
Managers and professionals	1.53	1577
Not specified incl. not in paid work	0.71	5964
EU15 Total population 15+	0.90	11832

In addition to computer skills and ability, the notion of competence related to the use of online public services also includes competence in handling public services, irrespective of the channel through which they are received. A factor in this is literacy in the wider sense of term, meaning the ability to grasp and process informational content. Data on literacy has been systematically collected by the OECD under the leadership of Statistics Canada through the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, see OECD 1997, 1998). The authors conclude from their analysis that “low literacy is a much larger problem than previously assumed in every [OECD] country surveyed: from one-quarter to over one-half of the adult population fail to reach the threshold level of performance considered as a suitable minimum skill level for coping with the demands of modern life and work” (OECD 1997:5, see table below). It must, therefore, be assumed that low literacy levels will also act as a barrier to the take-up of online public services, as long as these require more advanced literacy skills than traditional methods of provision, such as face-to-face interaction.

Table 3-5: Adults performing below an adequate threshold of literacy: Percentage of population in various age-groups at literacy levels 1 or 2 on document scale (OECD 1998: 100)

	Age group		
	16-65	16-25	46-55
Belgium (Flanders)	39.6	23.6	48.3
Germany	41.7	34.2	42.4
Ireland	57.0	49.9	65.9
Netherlands	35.9	22.9	48.3
Poland	76.1	65.3	82.6
Sweden	25.1	19.7	26.6
United Kingdom	50.4	44.4	52.7

1994-95 data

3.3 Differences in motivation

For our study, lack of motivation can be understood in two ways:

- lack of willingness to interact with providers of public services in general: This means a passive attitude towards public services as opposed to a more customer-like behaviour. It can be rooted in general attitudes towards society, which are notoriously difficult to

measure – especially in cross-cultural survey studies. It can, of course, also result from a low perceived utility of the service on offer.

- lack of willingness to use online services (rather than other channels) for the purpose of interacting with providers of public services. As Viherä & Nurmela (2002) point out, it is often the telephone rather than the Internet which is citizen’s preferred tool for societal communication. They conclude from this that “speech or telephone-based technology plays such an important role in the communications facilities available in our present-day society that it would scarcely seem justifiable to make the main forms of social services accessible via data networks, least of all on the grounds of equality of opportunity. When services and commerce are being launched to an ever-increasing degree in the network, special care must be taken to guarantee the availability of services also by telephone” (Viherä & Nurmela 2002:13).

Findings from the SIBIS survey showed that even among regular Internet users, the majority would prefer to use traditional channels such as the telephone, postal mail or face-to-face exchange rather than the Internet to interact with public administration for service provision (see table below).

Table 3-6: Preferred ways of receiving services by public administration; Base: regular Internet users (Data source: SIBIS 2002)

Would you prefer to use the Internet or use traditional channels for these purposes?							
	Library search	Job search	Change of address	Car registration	Personal documents	Income tax declaration	Declaration to police
Internet	73	58	42	38	35	28	17
Other channels	24	29	53	55	61	66	79
Don't know/ not applicable	4	14	4	7	3	6	4
<i>EU-15 weighted averages</i>							

In so far as the public has an interest (or even obligation) to provide public services to everybody, both groups needs special attention. The SeniorWatch study (2002) has estimated that as many as 18% of EU citizens aged 50-59 can be classified as “digitally challenged”, i.e. as non-computer users who are not interested in learning about technology and who do not wish to improve their computer skills. BISER has specifically explored attitudes towards the provision of public service through online channels. The study describes between 30% and 60% of Internet users (!) in EU regions as eGovernment refusers, because they state that they are *not at all interested* in public services on the Internet.

3.4 A first typology

Based on the model of Viherä (see Figure 3-1) and on the discussion in the preceding sections, we can now distinguish between a number of types of users and non-users of online public services¹⁰. The circles in the figure below shall describe here the sum of all persons having certain characteristics.

Table 3-7: Types of citizens according to online communication capabilities

Type	Description
A	User of online public services
B	Lack of motivation but access and competence given, most likely from user experience at work or from basic education. Large share of “self-excluded”.
C	Access and motivation given, but lack of competence. Traditional target for training measures, high probability of success of such measures.
D	Only access given, but neither competence nor motivation. Severe barriers exist before online public services will be used. Likely to apply for many older persons who live in households together with their children who provide the access.
E	Only access is missing. The bottleneck here is infrastructural equipment, which may need to be provided by the state as in the case of free public Internet access points. Also applies to many disabled who need special devices and services to access mainstream computer applications.
F	Only competence given, most likely from basic education. Motivation is likely to be the bottleneck here.
G	Only motivation exists. Applies for parts of the poor population who show a strong commitment to society, but lack the means to gain competence and access to the Net.
H	None of the three conditions exist. Likely to apply to significant parts of low qualified, low-income population in the EU, including poorly integrated ethnic communities.

This first typology will have to be refined and afterwards operationalised in order to make it measurable.

4 LACK OF SUFFICIENT INFORMATION AND THE ROLE OF eUSER

The eUSER project will collect fresh data about demand for online public services, which has tended to be neglected by recent studies (e.g. CGEY 2003, UN 2003). One exception is the “Top of the Web” study (CEC 2003b) which suffers, however, from an exclusive focus on users of online eGovernment services. More research is necessary on the entirety of *potential* users, which include the big majority of EU citizens who are not as yet users of online public services. This paper has tried to show that evidence-based information on access, competence and motivation as they have been defined above is needed to better understand potential demand for eGovernment.

Data collection will take place in the form of a representative multi-national population survey made up of more than 10,000 interviews across old and new Member States of the EU. The figure below lists the main variables and indicators which are planned to be collected using the survey, and outlines the basic approach towards analysis of the data.

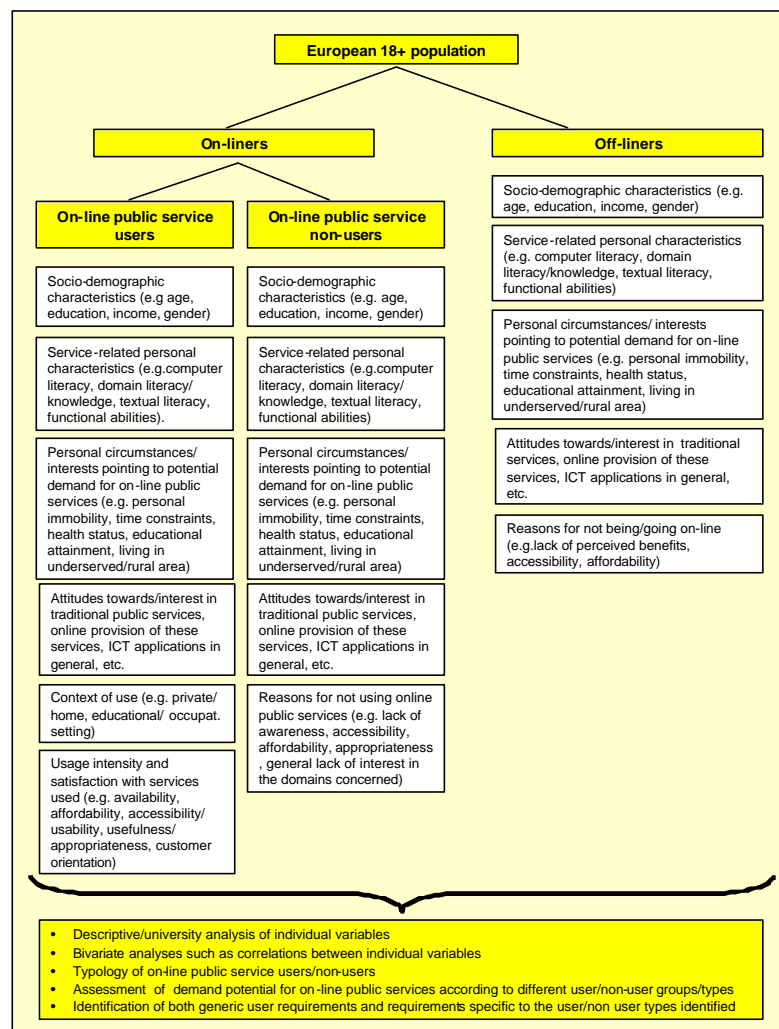


Figure 4-1: eUSER Methodological approach for data collection via surveys

¹⁰ Note that it is to some extent open whether this amounts to a matter of “being excluded” or rather

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has tried to present arguments for a strategy towards public online service provision which is guided much more by the needs, capabilities and preferences of potential users than it is the case in eGovernment at the present stage of development. The following observations form the background against which eUSER intends to improve knowhow about demand-side issues:

- The current focus in eGovernment development on supply-side measures seems to be misguided. We cannot any longer assume that a high quality online service will automatically lead to take-up by all or even the majority of the target audience.
- Users have a variety of reasons for not using online public services. Without a better grip on the diversity of user groups and their specific attitudes and capabilities with regard to using the Internet and public services in general, eGovernment projects will fail to reach their targets. More and better structured information on user characteristics, perceived needs, preferences and attitudes are badly needed.
- The diversity of user-side issues needs to be captured in a well structured way in order to better advise eGovernment decision-makers. While we must abandon the belief that services should be tailored to an “average user profile”, it will nevertheless be necessary to identify, based on robust empirical evidence, groups of users with more or less homogenous features and behaviour vis-à-vis online public services. This requires empirical research using data from existing sources, but also primary data collection.

The success of the eUSER project will have to be measured by the extent to which the open questions which have been outlined in this paper will be answered.

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