



Chapter XI

Enabling M-Government in South Africa: An Emerging Direction for Africa

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Abstract

This chapter describes the emergence of m-government in Africa. It examines the introduction of m-government in South Africa. The chapter also provides key examples of similar experiences with m-government in other African countries. The chapter focuses on the emerging patterns of m-government use, and it identifies key issues for consideration in its deployment in the African context. The chapter argues that m-government potential in South Africa in particular must be explored as a complement to the on-going Gateway Project e-government initiatives. The rapid penetration of mobile phones in South Africa offers clear opportunity to deliver government services via this new channel. Security, lack of content development capacity, expensive modern handsets, and high recharge rates are highlighted as

key barriers to m-government deployment to the poor in South Africa. The authors contend that development of an m-government strategy and a coordinated effort in awareness generation and service deployment will help deliver a more viable m-government.

Introduction

The rising expectations of citizens, businesses, and public administrators for better government service delivery has led to a serious policy debate on alternative delivery channels to meet the rapidly changing needs of the population. Although the Internet has been the main channel for e-government service delivery, access cost considerations, low e-literacy rates, and poor infrastructure to support the e-government architecture especially in remote locations has fueled the debate supporting the need for South Africa to seriously explore alternative methods of service delivery. Some of the leading contenders behind the alternative government service delivery revolution are mobile and wireless-based technologies. Clearly, the adoption and diffusion of such technologies is not meant to displace the World Wide Web (WWW) but rather complement it. The momentum toward embracing the m-government architecture is gaining ground throughout the world and in South Africa as well, where a number of digital government initiatives are already underway.

South Africa has adopted a broad vision for modernizing its public service and its focus is on citizen-centered electronic service delivery, participatory governance and building an efficient, effective, and accountable government (Farelo & Morris, 2006). In this regard, a number of e-government initiatives have been implemented at all three levels of government (i.e., National, Provincial and Municipal, or Local). One such initiative is the Cape Gateway Project (CGP) in the Western Cape Province (WCP). The CGP an initiative of the Center for E-Innovation (CeI) in the Provincial Government of the Western Cape (PGWC) is the focal point for the transformation of public service delivery in the WCP of South Africa. Currently, the CGP has been tasked to transform government service delivery from traditional face-to-face to the online interface (De Tolly, Maumbe, & Alexander, 2006). Serving a highly dualistic economy with large income disparities, diverse cultures, and races, the CGP's challenge is to effectively and equitably respond to the information and service needs of its diverse population. Given that Web-based service delivery is inadequate and risks exacerbating the digital divide by excluding disadvantaged communities in the townships and remote rural areas that face restricted access to the Internet, m-government seems to be the logical next generation mode of service provision designed to extend service delivery to a wider public audience and the under-served communities in particular.

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