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Evaluative Design of e-Government Projects: A Public Value Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to the evaluative design of e-government projects that complements traditional approaches which focus predominantly on measures such as efficiency and profit/ROI. Whilst such measures are important in the context of e-government, they do not naturally support the evaluation of the broader political and social objectives such as social inclusion, community regeneration, community well being and sustainability. This paper develops an evaluative design framework based upon the concept of Public Value, focusing on outcomes, services and trust, with particular attention to the latter. The framework is based upon analysis of a significant, live case study in London, UK.

Keywords

e-government, information systems, evaluation, design, public value, trust, customer satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) government, in common with many others, is promoting access to government services through its e-Government initiative. At one level, the goal is economic – efficiencies release resources to address citizens' preferences, be they revised rates of taxation or new and improved services (HMT, 2004; CIO, 2005). But there are also socio-political dimensions. One important concern is that deployment of e-government promotes social inclusion (ODPM 2004; 2005). A second is to meet citizens' expectations beyond individual satisfaction to include distributive equity where citizens attach value to the entitlements of others, for example, in respect of quality of health care, public education, access to justice (Kelly, Mulgan and Muers, 2002). The diversity of the objectives associated with e-government serve to distinguish their design and evaluation from commercial systems.

In so far as evaluation is practised in in e-government, the dominant approaches tend to mirror those of the private sector, focusing on functional alignment with requirements and performance measures such as cost reduction and return on investment (Willcocks and Lester 1999, Irani and Love 2002; Damodaran, Nicholls, Henney, Land and Farbey, 2005). Whilst such measures are important, they do not support the evaluation of the socio-economic and socio-political goals that characterise the strategic context of e-government. In beginning to address this shortcoming, this paper takes as its point of departure the observation that the broader expectations of citizens and governments find expression in the notion of Public Value (Moore 1995). Public value is the value which citizens and their representatives seek in relation to strategic outcomes and experiences of public services. It includes the value attached to the relatively concrete outcomes, such as reduced homelessness or universal access to health care, and to the more intangible, such as increased trust in government and public service providers. It also captures experience of the quality of public services and government (Kelly et al. 2002, Waltho 2005). This interpretation of public value suggests that for evaluative design of e-government we need measures that complement traditional approaches.

The contribution of this paper is part of a larger research programme which aims to identify principles, and develop frameworks, to support all parties involved in partnerships whose goal is to facilitate ICT-mediated public services. Elsewhere, we have described a framework for interpretive evaluative design of e-government, the 4-Capitals model (Grimsley, Meehan and Tan, 2005), using concepts derived from development economics (Grootaert, 1998). Here, we elaborate elements of a complementary evaluative design framework based upon public value as reflected in the achievement of outcomes, the provision of services and generation of trust.

Here, we use a case study from which we simultaneously abstract concepts and ground intuitions. 'Home Connections – Breaking Barriers' is a project which introduced ICT into the allocation of public social housing in central London, UK.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First we review some perceived limitations in evaluative design of IS. We then introduce our methodological 'tools': interpretive enquiry and the structured-case method. This is followed by a description of our initial conceptual framework – public value. Next, we introduce the case study. We then document the evolution of the conceptual framework which derives from the case study. Finally we provide a conclusion and some additional lessons learned.

INTERPRETIVE EVALUATIVE DESIGN AND STRUCTURED CASE – ELEMENTS OF RESEARCH METHOD

Willcocks and Lester (1999) observe that evaluation is one of the most neglected areas of information systems design. This is not simply due to omission; rather it reflects the difficulty in developing evaluative criteria . Frequently cited reasons for lack of evaluation are: problems identifying and quantifying benefits, unfamiliarity with evaluation techniques, difficulty interpreting results, lack of time, data, information or interest (Ballantine, Galliers and Stray, 1999, p142). Not only are there problems with objective metrics, there is little experience outside of the academic world of methods which quantify the subjective. Examples are 'feelings, attitudes and perceptions' (Powell, 1999, p159), or 'the intangible' (Farbey, Land and Targett, 1999, p184).

In the context of e-Government, problems of traditional evaluation are rendered more complex (Damodaran et al, 2005; Klecun and Cornford 2005). Stakeholders include government and both profit and not-for-profit organisations. 'Users' are not simply 'customers', they are 'clients'whose relationship with the service is governed by professional and ethical codes or legal entitlements. Users are also citizens expressing preferences and demanding accountability via the ballot box.

In response to the problem of traditional evaluation, academics have argued for *interpretive evaluation design* which seeks to gain a deep understanding of the views and interests of all stakeholders, accommodating subjective assessment and complementing objective techniques (Walsham 1999, Hirchheim and Smithson 1999, Jones and Hughes, 2001). Interpretive evaluation is neither prescriptive nor proscriptive in respect of the elicitation or analysis techniques which an evaluator may use, other than requiring the techniques to contribute to a subjective understanding in preference to an objective deliberation or judgement – if such is ever possible. Accordingly, evaluators use a portfolio of techniques ranging from the familiar interview and focus group, through to less familiar techniques such as hermeneutics.

One criticism of interpretive approaches to IS evaluation is that little conceptual support is offered to structure the stakeholder engagement and the evaluator's analysis. The structured-case methodological framework of Carroll and Swatman (2000) seeks to provide such support. The structured-case framework features a processual model with three components:

- an evolving *conceptual framework* representing the current state of a researcher's/evaluator's aims, theoretical foundations and understandings. The researcher begins with an initial conceptual framework based upon prior knowledge and experience and iteratively revises it until the enquiry terminates;
- a *research cycle* structures data collection, analysis, interpretation and synthesis;
- *literature-based scrutiny* is used to compare and contrast the evolving outcomes of the enquiry with extant literature.

The term 'case' is used to define the object of study; it may be a person, a group, a project, an organisation, a process, an IS, &c. The goal of structured-case is to produce new or revised knowledge and theory that describes relationships between concepts but is demonstrably rooted in observation. Structured-case has been used to develop understanding of ways in which local authorities undertake *ex ante* evaluation of e-Government projects (Irani, Love, Elliman, Jones and Themistocleous, 2005).

Interpretive enquiry is concerned with learning from experience through the identification of generically useful concepts, frameworks and theories, and informing future theory-based design and development practice. Structured-case, with its emphasis on evolving conceptual frameworks, is particularly suited to the production of these outcomes.

Data capture

Data relating to Home Connections was acquired in a variety of ways, including:

- system walks-through: a form of unstructured 'interview' revealing the developers/managers perspective in relatioin to (purpose, content, context).;
- formal project documentation from various stages of the life-cycle including project proposal, project commissioning (planning, resourcing and staffing, scheduling, risk management), and project hand-over. (These are inherently 'political' sources providing the basis for accountability);
- 'presentations' and 'stories' from developer/managers;
- monitoring of the Home Connections site for evidence of ongoing activity and progressive development;
- interviews (both structured and unstructured, scheduled and opportunistic).

At each stage the data from the case project were used to ground the emerging conceptual framework.

INITIAL CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK - PUBLIC VALUE

Moore (1995) roots the concept of Public Value in an observation that societies express "normatively compelling collective purposes" (p30). Such purposes are most clearly identifiable in respect of entitlements that are seen as 'universal', such as health, education, housing and sanitation, and justice. They relate to values of fairness, equity or equality. Moore argues that the nature of public value means that it should not be evaluated in terms of "the economic market place of individual consumers but in the political market place of citizens and the collective decisions of representative democratic institutions". Of course, citizens expect efficiency in respect of public expenditure, so this is not to imply that economic evaluation is inappropriate; rather, it points to the need for complementary measures that relate to citizens' desires and perceptions.

In mapping what it is that citizens value, Kelly et al. (2002) identify three categories: outcomes, services and trust. These categories are distinct but related, though Kelly et al. don't fully articulate how this works.

- *Outcomes*. Examples of outcomes include high employment, low recidivism following criminal conviction, environmental sustainability. Outcomes are more broadly defined than targets so are less prone to contrivance in their attainment.
- *Services*. Services meet enduring need, for example, education, health care, policing. In assessing public value in services, it is important to distinguish between clients who have a direct and live engagement and citizens who have endorsed the provision of the service for a "compelling collective purpose". Jointly or severally, services contribute to the achievement of outcomes.
- *Trust*. Within any community, individuals relate to a wide range of institutions: families, cultural, community and political associations, institutions providing public services, democratic and legislative fora. Relations with these institutions operate on the basis of some level of trust. Trust makes possible the achievement of community objectives that would not be attainable in its absence (Coleman 1990; Fukuyama 1995). Community trust relations are an expression of a community's capacity to achieve a better quality of life than would otherwise be available if its members acted merely as individuals (Lin 2001, Warren 2001). This is demonstrated by the fact that trust is positively associated with community sustainability, including economic, social and psychological well-being (Green, Grimsley and Stafford, 2005, Grootaert 1998, ODPM 2005).

In one respect, trust might be judged as another example of an outcome. However, other outcomes have a service-function origin (e.g., schools teach pupils, hospitals treat patients), but trust in is rooted in the quality of citizens' collective experience (Grimsley, Meehan and Tan, 2004b).

CASE STUDY: HOME CONNECTIONS – BREAKING BOUNDARIES

Strategic Purpose

The main goal of was to improve the experience of applying for and finding a solution to peoples' housing need. Breaking Boundaries explicitly sought to promote consideration of alternative forms of housing and alternative locations. The project sought to improve support for disadvantaged groups by taking a holistic view of needs, e.g., integrating advice and guidance on training and employment.

Socio-political Context

In the UK, local administrative councils, governed by elected representatives, maintain a stock of public housing which enables councils to discharge their statutory duty of care in respect of people who become homeless through a variety of circumstances. The central London boroughs experience high demand for public housing, arising both from long established communities and from newly prominent communities reflecting contemporary patterns of political and economic global and European migration. At any time there are about 60,000 individuals or families registered as being in need of housing within the five boroughs of the LCP. Allocations are made according to need, where need is expressed as an allocation of 'points' against criteria (e.g. see Borough of Camden, 2003). Points reflect many factors including the size of the family, health, disability, &c. Very few of those entitled to consideration will succeed in being allocated a home from borough housing stock.

Stakeholders and stakeholder relations

For Home Connections – Breaking Boundaries, the main government player is the The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). ODPM orchestrates central government funding of local government. It leads across government in promoting community cohesion and social inclusion. It frames UK housing policy, both private and public.

The boroughs of the LCP are politically, economically and socially diverse. However, in the context of the government's agenda and targets for ICT-mediated public service provision and avoiding social exclusion, the partnership had come together to identify areas of demand for 'joined-up' service provision for central London.

Each council administers its housing stock through a housing department, accountable to the elected council, but managed and staffed by professional council officers. Many housing departments have emerged as bureaucracies; that is they are characterised by possession of expertise, they are the locus of power and authority in relation to their clients. Culturally, they maintain professional attitudes to clients and administer housing stock in the public interest.

The customer base for Home Connections is also diverse. In London, much public housing exists in pockets and small estates. Some are strongly identified with established communities, reflecting the ethno-demographic history of an area; people from within these communities often have a strong desire to stay in the community as their housing needs change, for example, as they have families, grow old and infirm or develop disabilities. London has a long-standing role as a city which receives refugees seeking asylum, and they too have housing needs and entitlements derived from their legal status.

System development and deployment

Home Connections integrates Internet, SMS (txt), automatic telephony, and local print media into established personnel-based systems. Its principal functions enable customers to explore their eligibility, search for suitable properties, make bids for properties, arrange viewings, monitor progress of the bidding, receive (basic) feedback on outcomes, and examine their bid history.

The system is deployed across four of the five boroughs of the LCP. In its first year of operation, there were over 0.25 million bids made.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The role of an evaluative design framework is to support the evaluator and stakeholders in structuring their mutual engagement at various stages in the design life-cycle. The framework may have a number of elements or devices, such as lists, diagrams, keyword collections, scenarios, etc. It should be interpretable, though not necessarily consensually, to all parties concerned. In this section we document the evolution of the public value framework. We take the elements of public value in CF_1 (outcomes, services and trust) and reinterpret them and the relations between them in the context of Home Connections – Breaking Barriers. Our goal is to arrive at an ever more mature evaluative framework applicable in the domain of e-government.

Relating and evaluating elements of public value

The first evolution of the framework involved derivation of the relationship between the three initial elements of public value, driven by an evaluative (i.e. measurement) perspective. Given that there are often multiple perspectives at work, it is also important to consider the extent to which there is consensus or contestation in respect of evaluation.

Moore (1995) argues for techniques of programme evaluation and cost-effectiveness, distinguishing these from cost-benefit analysis on the basis that they presuppose the "compelling collective purpose" of the outcome rather than optimising individual benefit across a range of competing alternative outcomes. Kelly et al. (2002) observe that the 'new public management' of the 1980s and 1990s was "premised on the applicability of management techniques across both public and private sectors" and that government value would be created "by mimicking organisational and financial systems used by business" (p9). The result, they assert, was an emphasis on narrow concepts of cost-efficiency and a downplaying of non-functional objectives that were difficult to measure.

The most common subjective measure is satisfaction. There is some evidence that people distinguish satisfaction and dissatisfaction (MORI, 2001). Satisfaction is driven by service attributes such as a sense of attentiveness, friendliness, commitment, aesthetics, security, whereas dissatisfaction is driven by attributes such as integrity, functionality, flexibility. Some attributes span the two, such as responsiveness and care. This suggests that there may be a bias due to a framing effect if evaluative questions are phrased in terms of satisfaction alone.

Trust, too, is commonly measured subjectively. Grimsley et al. (2003) have shown that there is a distinction to be made between trust in government and community institutions, so-called 'vertical trust', and trust in family friends and neighbours, so-called 'horizontal trust' (Braithwaite and Levy 1998). In communities in which vertical trust is low, horizontal trust can substitute and predominate, thus, general measures of community trust may fail discriminate between forms of trust important to evaluation of e-Government.

Grimsley, et al (2003, 2004a) have demonstrated a positive correlation between satisfaction with public services and trust in public services. Further, they establish that both trust and satisfaction are driven, in part, by three measures of community-level citizen experience: a sense of being well-informed, a sense of personal control in one's life, and a sense of influence. (In this context, a sense of personal control means that people have scope to juggle the diverse demands made upon their time: work, family care, social life; public services which are 'opportunity-costly' diminish this personal control.)

The link between trust and satisfaction is made concrete when we observe that the service attributes associated with satisfaction (attentiveness, friendliness, commitment, aesthetics, security) tend towards the informational, and the service attributes associated with dissatisfaction (integrity, functionality, flexibility) tend to impact personal control and influence. This analysis implies that the three experiential dimensions (well-informedness, personal control and influence) deserve focal interest in evaluating public value, especially in relation to public services. An added advantage of focusing on these dimensions is that, unlike 'satisfaction' and 'trust', they give a more tangible sense of the experience citizens are seeking.

In order to make clear this conceptual framework (CF_2) we represent its top-level elements and their relations in Figure 1.

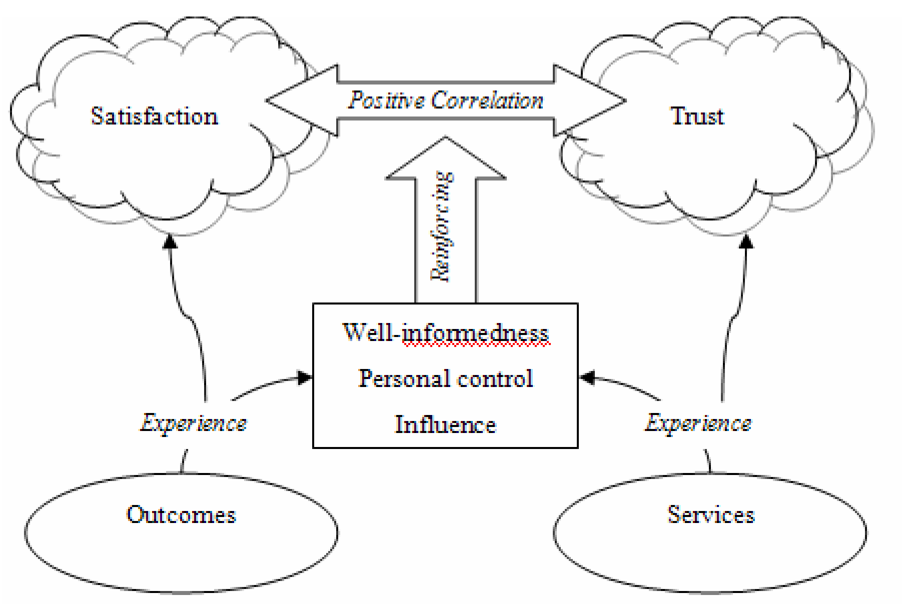

Figure 1. The Elements and relations of CF_2

At this point, Figure 1 can be read as a hypothesis resting upon the empirical research outlined. Accordingly we look for evidence to support the central hypothesis, that well-informedness, personal control and influence are underlying experiential dimensions of satisfaction and trust. In an analysis of 63 ‘summary points’ included in the executive summary of customer focus group feedback (Chan and Harkness 2004) only 16 points could not readily be associated with one of the experiential dimensions sought. (Of those points not related most were either introductory observations, e.g. demographic notes, or they related specific technical ‘glitches’ experienced by individuals, or they related to the quality of the housing stock itself.) Of the points that could be positively classified, many were multiply related. This suggests that the experiential dimensions proposed provide a relevant coding scheme for evaluation.

We were particularly interested in the contribution of client evaluation and trust. This flowed from an observation by the project manager that despite the fact that Home Connections had introduced significant transparency and user participation, there had been a perceptible rupture in the trust relation between some clients and housing officers. Trust, as a term, had not appeared explicitly in the customer feedback. Accordingly, we sought to identify implicit incidences of a threatened or actual break in trust, analysing client comments in terms of the three experiential dimensions in the framework. By way of example, consider statements in Table 1.

Statement No.	**Client comment**	**Information**	**Control**	**Influence**
1	*“The system works fine, but nobody looks at your personal situation.”*			ü
2	*“It would be nice to meet someone from Housing to let you know where you stand* [on bids].”	ü		ü
3	*“The website is a jazzed up version of the council trying to get out of answering questions! If the correct information was up there on the website, we would not be phoning up for reassurance.”*	ü	ü	
4	*“It gives you false hope…. You’re just left waiting…. The system raises people’s hopes – you have to wait for two to three months before you find out if you have been successful.”*	ü		ü
5	*“The real blockage with these schemes, which are excellent, is with the council.”*			ü
6	*“There is no communication so the wheels grind ever so slowly – the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.”*	ü		ü
7	*“The officer told me that properties are allocated on a ‘first come first served’ basis, so the people who bid earlier in the morning have a better chance than those bidding in the afternoon* [untrue]. *People in the councils don’t know as much as we know about it* [Home Connections]*!”*	ü		

Table1. Analysis of trust threatening incidents.

On the basis of this and similar analyses we offer the following observations. The clients are evaluating the process as a whole, making a clear distinction between the ICT mediation of their relation with the council and the council function itself. Threats to trust appear to arise when there is a dislocation between the ‘implied promise’ of Home Connections as an ICT system and the conduct of the ‘back office’ processes. This would explain why the majority of comments relate to issues of information and/or lack of influence. The relative absence of issues of personal control in Table 1 would support the observation that the ICT element of Home Connections has appreciably enhanced the flexibility people have in engaging with the housing process. This interpretation is reinforced by the analysis in (Table 2) where information and (enhanced) personal control dominate issues which promote trust/satisfaction.

Statement No.	Client comment	Information	Control	Influence
8	*"I like the autonomy of being able to pick."*		ü	
9	*"You can choose the area in which you want to live."*		ü	
10	*"You can visit the property before you bid if you want to (only the outside though)."*	ü	ü	
11	*"You can see what's available every week, so you can start to see where [in the borough] you want to be."*	ü	ü	
12	*"It's nice to see what's available when previously you have always been told there was nothing."*	ü		
13	*"I like the right to refuse a property without it affecting your future chances of being housed."*		ü	
14	*"I like having a say in the property and being able to turn a property down."*		ü	ü

Table2. Non-trust threatening direct quotes.

It is possible to discern three distinct informational problems, suggesting each be considered in turn for purposes of evaluation. The first concerns situations where there is a perceived lack of initial information; the second is when there is contradictory information; the third is the absence or significant delay of feedback information when a client triggers some 'event' in the overall process.

In respect of threats to client trust, as considered here, the high-level lesson may be summarised as 'trust is jeopardised when the expectations of being better informed, and having more personal control and influence, which are inherently raised by the systems introduction, are not realised in the experience'.

Incorporating the Experiential Dimentions into the Evaluative Framework

The final component of the framework seeks to support the evaluative designer in addressing the incorporation of the three experiential dimensions we have highlighted. (Taken with CF_2 this elaboration comprises CF_3.) This element is an Experience Management Matrix (Grimsley et al. 2004b).

The intuition behind this instrument is that the experiential factors apply to any two parties in a trust relationship. Thus, for each party, there is scope for shaping the relationship by managing their own communication of information, the distribution of control, and the deployment of influence, in respect of the other party. This gives rise to nine 'relational spaces' in the trust relation, each of which points to a range of system design options. If we consider ourselves in the role of a manager of an e-government system, we may formulate three related strategies; an Information Strategy, a Control Strategy, and an Influence Strategy. Each must address issues in relation to each of the desired experiential outcomes. For example, the information strategy must consider how to induce a sense of well-informedness, what information facilitates personal control/autonomy, and what information is needed to convey a sense of influence.

In the case of Home connections, a key aspect of successfully addressing the first of these issues were an unprecedented degree of openness about the housing available and the criteria for allocation. In enhancing personal control/autonomy, Home Connections integrated communications channels through which clients were able to initiate system events at times that suited their personal circumstances. In promoting a sense of influence, Home Connections planned feedback mechanisms to reassure clients that the system was aware of their most recent actions. In terms of communication of information across all experiential dimensions, ensuring that information from all sources (including officials) is consistent was crucial.

In respect of the control strategy, the first question is how can control be used to promote well-informedness. The key is to be proactive in initiating communication. The second question introduces a major design task as it concerns the distribution of control between the parties across all ‘subtasks’ is the overall process - different clients will need or prefer one distribution of responsibilities over another. The third question concerns reinforcing a sense of influence by being responsive to actions by the other party. Particular problems arise if each party assumes that the initiative lies with the other in terms of the next process event.

Finally, we consider Influence Strategy. In promoting well-informedness, there needs to be information with legitimates the experience the other party has of current policy and practice. Home Connections users were unhappy when they did not understand the responses of the system. Particular communications problems arose when officials published responses that suggested there was a hidden set of ‘unofficial’ rules being applied. Home Connections presented a particularly challenging problem in relation to the use of influence to manage clients’ expectations without inducing a sense of loss of control/autonomy. The reality of housing allocations in central London is that for most applicants, the outcome will result in public housing in their area of choice. The problem is to influence the clients’ perception of the solution space without this being experienced as a diminution of control/autonomy. Home Connections achieves this by taking a holistic view of clients needs, opening up alternative solutions that address the need for employment, family education, health care, &c. By proactively directing clients to complementary sources of advice and guidance Home Connections addressed the final aspect of an influence strategy which concerns the style of ‘negotiation’ to be employed. Modern negotiation theory tells us that coordinative and integrative styles in which the goals of the other party are acknowledged and accommodated respectively, induce stable relations based upon term trust (Pruitt 1981).

By examining the information, control and influence strategies implicit in the Home Connections systems, we were able to phrase a set of generic questions oriented to trust promotion (Table 3). These can be used for evaluative design of other e-government systems.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND SUMMARY OF SOME ADDITIONAL LESSONS LEARNED

This paper has given an account of a framework supporting evaluative design of e-government projects with a particular focus on the concept of public value expressed as outcomes, services and trust. The inquiry was grounded in a significant e-government project.

The elements of the framework that emerged articulate the relationship between outcomes, services and trust in terms of three experiential dimensions: a sense of being well-informed, a sense of personal control in one’s life, and a sense of influence, which appear to drive trust and satisfaction. It demonstrated that these dimensions could be used to analyse evaluative comments from stakeholders in a way that pointed to issues of trust and satisfaction. Finally, it outlined an Experience Management Matrix as a tool which supports the consideration of how an e-government system may be designed to promote trust (and satisfaction).

The structured inquiry which produced the framework also provided some generic ‘lessons to be learned’. In no particular order, we can summarise the generic issues and lessons:

- Evaluative design should apply to whole system as the client/citizen perceives it and not just the ICT platform – i.e. ‘input to outcome’.
- The experiential dimensions of well-informedness, personal control and influence are more tangible than satisfaction and trust and their use points to corrective design actions. They also facilitate an open style of evaluative discussion.
- In respect of promoting a sense of being well-informed, there are three informational issues to focus on: initial availability, consistency, timely feedback
- In terms of promoting a sense of personal control, introduce multiple ways to achieve the same end (and provide rapid and prominent feedback in relation to any ‘event’).
- In terms of promoting a sense of influence, again, timely feedback is valuable. Many clients sought some expression of personalization.
- It is possible to maintain trust even if the desired outcome is very difficult to attain or is even unattainable by taking a holistic view of clients needs and proactively supporting the client is addressing their wider needs.

Trust Strategy	Target Experience in User: Sense of being Well-informed	Sense of Personal Control	Sense of being able to Influence
Information Strategy Questions	How should information be structured and organised and communicated to promote well-informedness?	What information is needed and how can it be organised to promote a sense of enhanced personal control?	What information is needed to facilitate the formation of informed views and how to convey them appropriately and effectively? What feedback is needed, and when?
Distribution of Control Questions	At all stages of the process, with which party should the initiative lie in the elicitation and provision of information?	How might responsibility for the subtasks that together achieve the objectives of the relationship be distributed between the parties?	With whom should the initiative lie in respect of the next event(s) in the process?
Deployment of Influence Questions	What evidence is available to legitimate current policy and practice?	How might perceptions of needs be changed so that diminution of the space of alternative courses of action/opportunity is not experienced as a diminution of a sense of control?	What negotiation strategies will be perceived as trustworthy? How can they be enacted using ICT?

Table 3. Experience Management Matrix.

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