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# Government Readiness to CRM Adoption: A Local Authority Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Initially focusing on e-government initiatives, governments have already started to deploy Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems in order to improve operational performance. CRM is seen as constituting a strong initiative that can promote the proximity between government and citizens, and its adoption implies wide organizational changes towards customers. Such changes involve strategic, operational, and cultural aspects. Accordingly, we have developed a study in a Local Authority context in the UK to analyze the extent to which operational structures and processes are aligned to strategic orientations towards customers, proposing an interpretive scoring method for helping to diagnose this aspect. Regarding CRM adoption, the study's findings show that fragmented solutions and integration of technological resources are potential problems to be overcome. Furthermore, the managers' viewpoint about government information accessibility suggests that Local Authorities might be still struggling between two paradoxical Acts: Freedom of Information and Data Protection.

## Keywords

CRM systems, e-government, customer-focused strategy, data accessibility, integration.

## INTRODUCTION

The adoption of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) initiatives is gradually becoming one of the main concerns of the public sector. Indeed, government agencies and departments have already started to deploy CRM initiatives to support their activities. It is becoming very common to find government initiatives focusing upon improving relationship strategies by the allocation of new information and communication technologies. CRM seems to be somehow implicated in a general scenario that provides an answer for new social needs and citizens expectations, facilitating sharing of information between government institutions and their stakeholders. The application of CRM systems in the government context is thus seen as constituting a strong initiative to promote the proximity between government and citizens (Neff and Kvandal, 2001).

A fundamental aspect of CRM is that it requires the redevelopment of organizational structures so that there are new service units and new product offerings arranged around a refreshed understanding of customer needs. Regarding this aspect, Reddy (2001) comments that misled organizational change and mismatched technology infrastructure are cited as usual suspects for CRM implementation failures. However, he argues that these symptoms are not in the root cause of failures. Instead, the main cause of failure is the lack of an actionable CRM strategy.

The problems above are not different in the government context. The scarcity of public-sector best practices compels government executives to test out private-sector concepts of CRM, even though the two sectors have different characteristics. The growth of CRM and its move into public sector raise a series of issues. Some of the issues we are concerned with are: how can a government department or agency check its adaptability to CRM? Do operational structures and processes really comply with strategic orientation towards customers? Is there any cultural aspect that might hinder the implementation of CRM solutions?

Accordingly, this paper describes the findings of a study aimed to investigate aspects of CRM applicability in the government context. The study was conducted in a Local Authority context in the UK and factors related to strategic, operational, and cultural aspects were approached for examining the subject. A graphic model that represents a combined measurement of strategic and operational dimensions is presented with the purpose of providing a simple and quick view of how balanced is a department's strategic and operational orientation towards customer. The managers' viewpoint regarding access to government information represents the cultural component of the study.

In the next sections we are going to address some theoretical aspects that situate CRM in the government context, as well as highlight some of its main functionalities and potentialities. In the sequence, we will briefly describe the study's methodology and main findings.

## **CRM IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

Many organizations throughout the world have been implementing CRM initiatives with the purpose of improving their business and creating a lasting competitive advantage, adopting "relationship" as the word of order. In order to implement relationship strategies and exploit their information technologies, companies have been deploying and integrating CRM systems with their legacy systems and network channels. When well managed, these integrations are reputed to constitute a successful combination of technologies that provides the necessary resources to allow the execution of strategies that will situate a company closer to its customers (Ling and Yen, 2001).

It is possible to articulate a series of similarities between private and public institutions in terms of business practices and operational processes. However, given their different purposes and nature, the similar practices and processes are developed under different dominant paradigms. In other words, their similarities allow the adoption of analogous strategies, however these strategies are deployed under different philosophical paradigms. For instance, private organizations might seek to establish customer-focused strategies for building customer loyalty, retaining existing customers, and raising customer profitability. In their turn, public organizations might be developing customer-focused strategies for raising government responsiveness and strengthening government acceptance by society. In both cases the same strategy is being adopted under different perspectives and for different purposes. Regardless of the different paradigms and objectives, customer-focused strategies promote significant benefits for either private or public sector and a mechanism that allows the management of customer relationships is probably welcomed by both sectors. This general compatibility, around the idea of customer-focused strategies, might help to explain the acceptance of CRM initiatives in the government context even though its origins lie in the private sector.

By deploying CRM solutions together with e-government initiatives governments are aiming to improve their relationship with customers and provide better services to them. For achieving these objectives they are focusing upon responsiveness, accessibility, and organizational performance aspects.

### **Responsiveness**

Governments can be considered as the largest service providers in the world and they are becoming increasingly aware of the need to become more responsive to their customers (Shine, 2002). Building relationship with customers is an inherent aspect of governmental activity. Individuals and businesses have a whole-life relationship with government, interacting with a broad range of public agencies and departments in many different circumstances from birth to death. The cognisance of public opinion is a fundamental requisite for improving government responsiveness, which actually means more than merely reacting to popular demands. Starling (1982) warns that government responsiveness can also mean that government takes the initiative in the proposal of solutions for problems previously identified.

### **Accessibility**

Accessibility aspects represents an opportunity for governments to improve their democratic processes by providing information to citizens, enabling citizens to register their views on public issues, and allowing the voices of citizens to be heard by each other, by politicians, and by public servants (Heeks, 1999; Pratchett, 1999). Perrith and Rustad (2000) argue that accountability and quality of government decisions improve when members of the public have information allowing them to express meaningful views before decisions are made; hence, the legitimacy of public institutions strengthens when the public knows what the institutions are doing.

As a matter of fact, providing information to the public is not a recent concern of democratic governments. What is new is the existing technological context that has significantly widened the possibilities of information access and sharing. Within this scenario a key issue is that governments are seeking to adjust their legal framework for regulating information accessibility and data sharing practices. This is within a new socioeconomic context whose communications means are increasingly expanding to the Internet and mobile technologies. On the other hand, within the same scenario, public organizations are facing the challenge of securing the integrity of electronic government. A chief problem is how to provide information

accessibility and sharing without threatening privacy rights. The paradoxical problem is how to preserve security and privacy without threatening freedom of information rights. In the rise of the information age, the public sector sphere is increasingly espousing freedom of information principles while at the same time restricting dissemination of information generated by public agencies through electronic databases (Perrith and Rustad, 2000).

### **Organizational Performance**

It is becoming increasingly difficult for citizens to understand why they can buy airplane tickets and book hotels in a couple of mouse clicks but have to stand in a queue for hours to renew their driver's license. Governments are aware of the social expectations for automated services and they have been trying to respond to such a pressure investing in information and communication technologies. In fact, it is already possible to conduct online a series of government processes such as paying taxes, getting a passport, voting, submitting forms, and registering comments on public issues (Neff and Kvandal, 2001). Government initiatives to implement e-government solutions meet the public sector needs for delivering service by electronic means, and this is doubtless a significant step towards customers.

### **CRM FUNCTIONALITIES AND POTENTIALITIES**

The confluence of changing customer demands, emerging marketing theories, and available information technologies have been imposing a shift on the way organizations relate to customers. In this scenario, CRM systems are claimed to provide the functionality that allows an organization to make its customers the focal point of all departments within the firm (Kandell, 2000). According to Goldenberg (2002), CRM provides seamless coordination between all customer-facing functions. Hence, productivity enhancement can be achieved by customer-facing personnel being able to do customer-related work more quickly and less painfully since, for example, they no longer have to re-type customer information several times and do not have to look up a customer's overall dossier in multiple computer systems.

Second Pang and Norris (2002), the range of CRM solutions is very broad and may involve integration and improvements in information and communication technologies, including:

1. Integration of computer telephony that supports call center's activities such as voice recognition for directing calls and matching calls against names in a database.
2. Customer self-service websites that allow customers themselves conduct online transactions such as search for relevant information, download forms and software, and request services or goods.
3. Improvement of business intelligence using segmentation and analytical tools that identify customers' patterns and needs.
4. Implementation of mass customization processes through which goods and services are individualized to satisfy specific customers needs.

Elliot (2000) argues that CRM is not just a set of software applications and information technologies integrations, but a business strategy that focuses on building customer service excellence. In spite of its strong link with marketing, the implementation of CRM strategy is not just the responsibility of marketing department or other customers service sectors. For Ling and Yen (2001), CRM is a wide business strategic process that involves the organization as a whole, spanning across different business functions. Kandell (2000) describes CRM business approach as the use of technology to identify, interact, and track every transaction with individual customers, developing a learning relationship. Indeed, each customer interaction produces extensive data that can be stored in a database. One of the purposes of CRM systems is to make inferences over this database in order to generate knowledge about customers' needs, wants, and preferences, which promotes the execution of faster services and the raising of customers' level of satisfaction. In the end, these achievements may reflect on improved government reputation (Batista, 2003).

CRM also improves responses at customers' interactions regardless their channel of contact, enabling the following benefits for governments in particular (SPSS, 2000):

- Gain a deeper understanding of customers' needs and maximize return on programmes and services.
- Better meet customer expectations when recommending services and information that people are most likely to need.
- Service representatives could respond citizen calls for service with personalised actions.

- When designing programs, departments would be able to know which of their many potential participants were most likely to enroll and be successful in these programs.
- Develop preventive measures to reduce program abandonment when learning why and when participants leave programs.

### **MAIN THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

Based upon the theoretical aspects and issues addressed thus far, we assume that building and managing long-term relationships with customers are key factors for governments as much as they are for private organizations. Better performance in building, consolidating, and managing relationships with customers is a strong reason for the blossoming of CRM initiatives in the government context. In practice, governments are embedding CRM solutions together with e-government initiatives because its principles and functionalities boost the improvement of responsiveness, accessibility, and organizational performance.

CRM adoption implies the establishment of customer-focused strategies that should be considered prior to the deployment of technical solutions (Elliot, 2000). For verifying organizational adaptability to CRM we need to verify whether organizational strategies are really customer-oriented (Kandell, 2000) and also verify whether these strategic orientations are supported by operational processes and structures that enable integration towards customers (Ling and Yen, 2001; Goldenberg, 2002). In addition, it is important to consider cultural aspects in this context; people's values and beliefs might potentially hinder the adoption of customer-focused strategies and processes.

### **A LOCAL AUTHORITY STUDY**

The main objective of the study was to verify the applicability of CRM practices in the government context. As CRM implementation implies the assumption of strategies and processes focused on customers, we looked at the extent to which different departments of a Local Authority (LA) were adopting customer-oriented strategies, as well as whether their operational processes and structures were really supporting or complying with existing customer-focused strategies. An important assumption is that one of the CRM practices is the establishment of a diversified number of integrated channels of customer interactions in order to facilitate the communications flow, this way enhancing information access to the public. Hence, the verification of aspects regarding information access to the public was a fundamental part of the study. Accordingly, we have verified public managers' viewpoint regarding government information accessibility and whether such a viewpoint impacts the implementation of customer-focused practices.

### **Methodology**

We have been developing multiple case studies as the research method. This method is more appropriate and suitable to this type of research because it is preferred in examining contemporary events when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. It is also appropriate when investigators desire to cover contextual conditions and not just the phenomenon of study, and when they rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence (Yin, 1989).

This paper reports some of the findings of the first of a series of case studies that are being conducted within the local authorities context in the UK. The instruments and techniques for collecting data were: self-completed questionnaire composed by closed questions, semi-structured interview with government senior officers, and systematic observation of department's processes and structures.

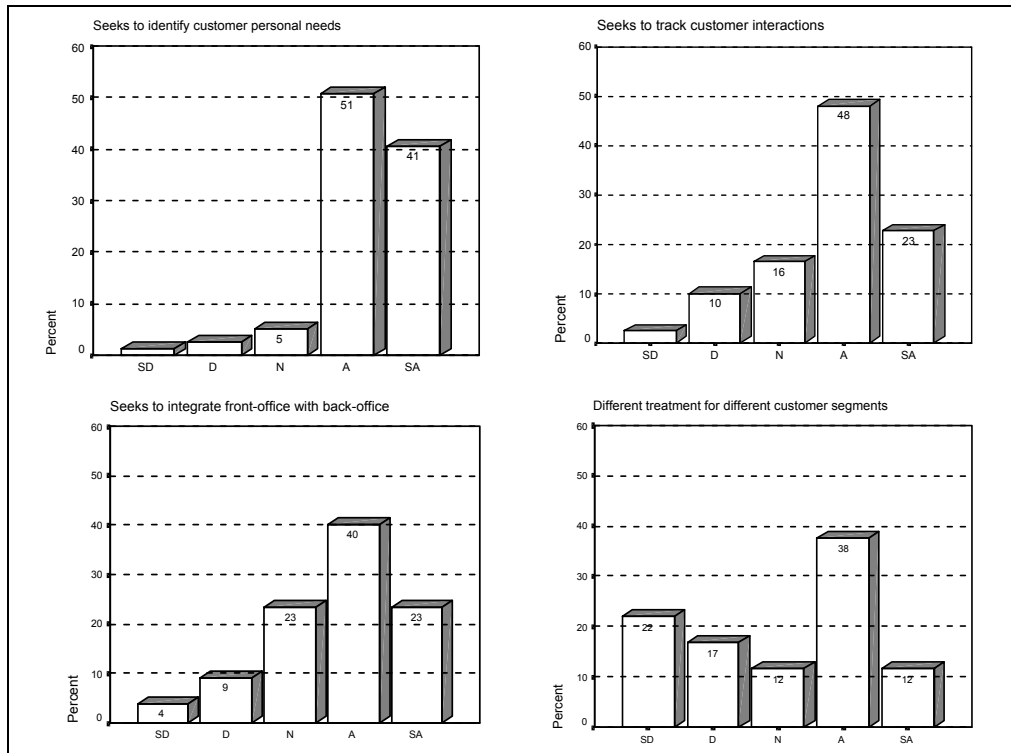
### **Demographics**

This study was conducted in a LA whose administrative structure is mainly composed by five head units or Departments, namely: Corporate Affairs, Community Services, Education & Personal Development, Environment & Public Protection, and Social & Housing Services. We had 79 replied questionnaires, which represented a response rate of 35%. From the 79 respondents, 33% were senior officers or advisors, 62% were officers or managers, and 5% were supervisors. Most of the respondents (65%) were more than 3 years occupying their respective positions or posts. A total of 11 senior officers were interviewed.

**Results**

*Customer-orientation: strategic x operational aspects*

The significance of issues related to customer-focused strategies and operational processes and structures were evaluated through the eyes of the LA staff. Questions in a form of five-point Likert scale –Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neither agree nor disagree (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA)– were used for the assessment of the respondents’ level of agreement with issues regarding customer-orientation strategic and operational aspects. The Figure 1 shows some of the outcomes regarding strategic issues.



**Figure 1. Strategic aspects regarding customer orientation**

The results above show that, regarding customer orientation strategies, the LA is mainly concerned with identifying customers’ personal needs. In fact, 51% of the respondents agree and 41% strongly agree with this aspect. For achieving this objective they think it is strategically important to track customers interactions (71%) and integrate front-office with back-office (63%). Since the LA is mainly focusing on customer personalization aspects, customer segmentation does not represent a strong strategic orientation. Half of the respondents agree (38%) or strongly agree (12%) with the assertion that the LA seeks to adopt different treatment for different customer segments.

Regarding operational aspects, some of the obtained results are shown in the Figure 2. According to the outcomes, the LA is registering detailed information about customers (confirmed by 68% of the respondents) and also registering information regarding customers’ interactions (76% of the respondents). These operational aspects comply with strategic orientations for identifying customer needs and tracking interactions (Figure 1). Some operational problems show up when only 45% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the assertion that their department is able to provide customer information to other departments, which might be an indication of integration problems. Furthermore, the LA has not fully developed self-service functionalities for customers (78% of the respondents do not think their departments have customer self-service mechanisms). This aspect suggests that the LA may be still improving its operational infrastructure before developing self-service mechanisms.

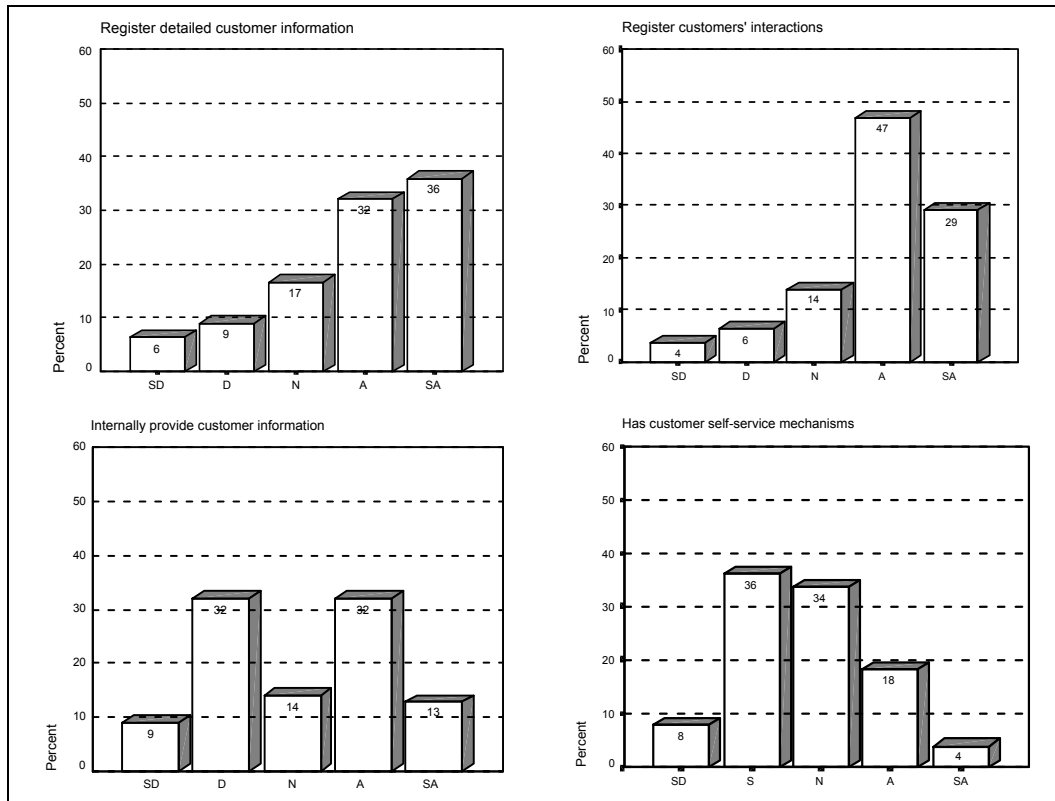


Figure 2. Operational aspects regarding customer orientation

In order to check whether the LA is really facing integration problems, we have further looked at other operational aspects such as channels integration, cross-service integration, and customer information obtainment (Figure 3).

According to the results above, most of customer interactions are made through traditional channels such as telephone (46%) and in person (28%). In order to cope with the volume of 74% of customers' interactions by telephone and in person the LA has deployed a series of one-stop shops –eight in total– located in different geographic areas within its region. The one-stop shops have an integrated structure to support customer-facing and telephone interactions. In practice, they act as an “interface” or “gateway” between citizens and LA’s departments, providing information and advice.

Observing the LA’s Internet Web site it is apparent that there are some available online services such as notification of address changing, verification of current council tax balance, enquiry of housing repairs, and even some online payment functionalities. However, despite these online facilities only 4% of the interactions are made through the Internet. This aspect suggests that there may be a lack of strategy for encouraging customers to utilize electronic channels of interaction. Indeed, from the interviews and observations we configured out that at the moment the LA’s systems are not fully integrated with the Web, and such a fact hinders any development of strategies for fostering electronic interactions.

Other problems of integration also appear in the outcomes shown in Figure 3. Approximately half of the respondents said that the channels of customer interactions as well as cross-services processes are not adequately integrated, which harms the development of joined-up services. In addition, most of the respondents (63%) have some difficulty for obtaining information about customers, which definitely confirms the existence of integration problems. In fact, according to the LA’s IT Manager they have a number of systems from a variety of suppliers and the systems were not designed to work together.

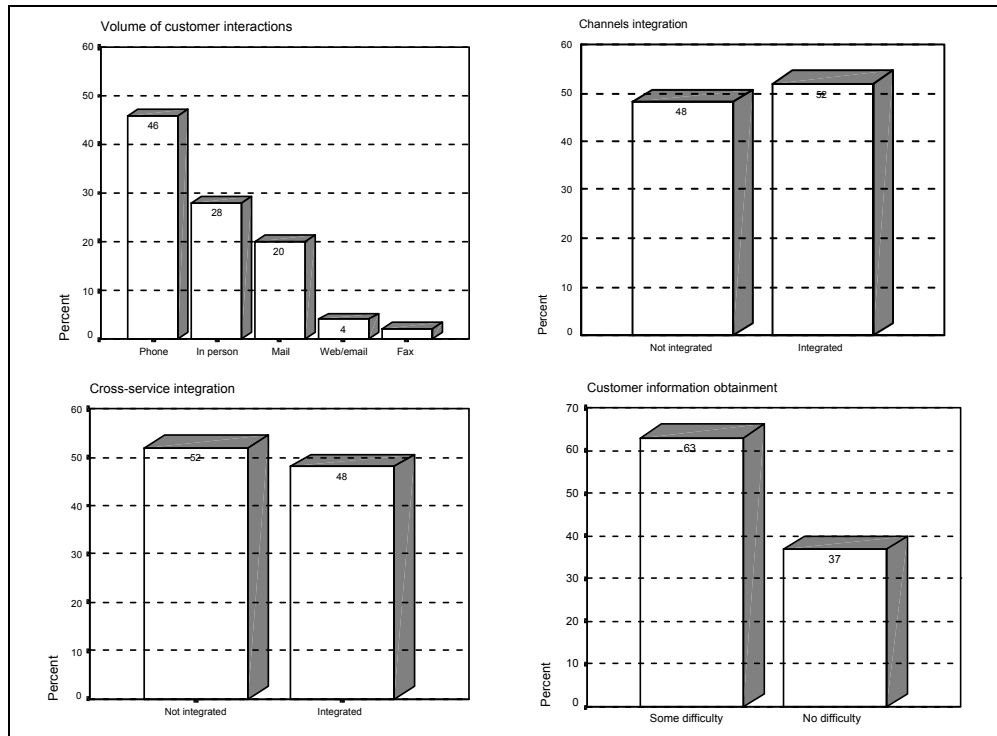


Figure 3. Integration aspects

The CRM Grid

Having looked at strategic and operational aspects regarding orientation toward customers, we used a graphical tool for representing those two dimensions at the same time, so that we could grasp a quick view of customer-orientation aspects. We termed this graphical representation “CRM Grid” (Batista and Kawalek, 2002) and it can provide some insights regarding the extent to which strategies and operational processes and structures are oriented to customers as well as how aligned these two dimensions are (Figure 4). More specifically, the CRM Grid model is an interpretive scoring method for helping managers to analyze the extent to which they are strategically and operationally customer-oriented, which implies how adaptive they are to CRM adoption.

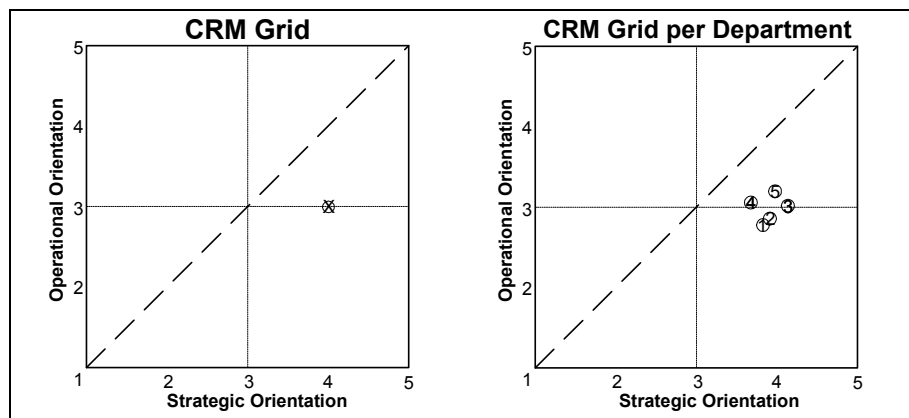


Figure 4. Looking at strategic and operational orientation and alignment

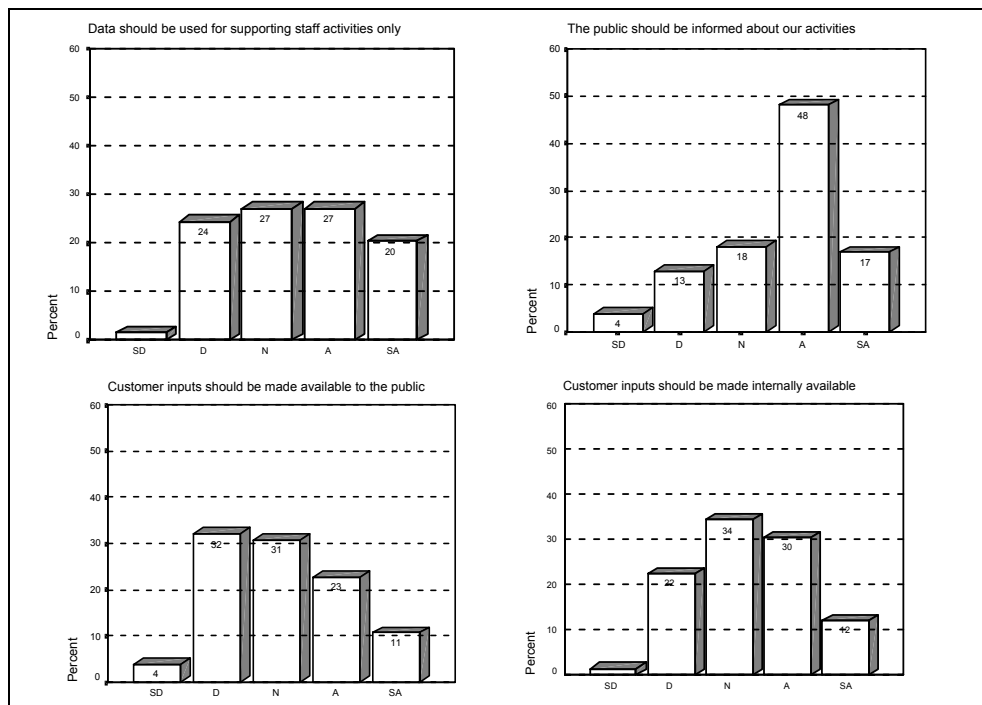


In practice the CRM Grid has two scales, one represented by a horizontal axis that expresses the level of strategic orientation towards customers, and another represented by a vertical axis that expresses the level of operational aspects supportive to customer relationships. The combination of these two measurements pinpoints a single position within the grid, which allows government managers to grasp a quick view regarding CRM adaptability. The diagonal represents balanced strategic and operational aspects. Measures close to the diagonal suggest that operational processes and structures support customer-focused strategies; contrarily, measures off the diagonal suggest that current operational processes and structures are not adequately supporting customer-focused strategies.

Figure 4 shows the CRM Grid for the LA and its departments (1=Corporate Affairs, 2=Community Services, 3=Education & Personal Development, 4=Environment & Public Protection, and 5=Social & Housing Services). As we can see, the grid promptly suggests that although the LA has established some strategies focused on customers, its operational structures and processes are not fully compliant with the strategic orientation. In other words, the situation indicates that the current operational structures and processes should be redesigned toward customers in order to support the established strategies. The detailed CRM Grid for the departments allows managers to check the specific position of each department. This way, operational adjustments for aligning structures and processes with strategies can be conducted according to each department situation.

*Information accessibility*

Based upon the study’s findings, we learned that although the LA’s departments are registering detailed information about customers and their interactions, problems of integration are hindering information sharing and access. An issue that emerges from this context is to know whether the difficulties for sharing and accessing information are due to operational aspects only. Therefore, we looked at some aspects regarding information accessibility in order to shed light to that issue. Questions in a form of five-point Likert scale were used for the assessment of the respondents’ level of agreement with issues regarding government information usage and accessibility. The Figure 5 shows some of the outcomes.



**Figure 5. Information usage and accessibility**

As we can see, approximately half of the respondents agree (27%) or strongly agree (20%) that government information should be exclusively used for supporting staff activities. Regarding government information accessibility, most of the respondents (65%) think that the public should be informed about the departments’ activities; however, they are more

reserved concerning access to customer inputs. Only 34% of the respondents agree (23%) or strongly agree (11%) that the public should be able to access such inputs. They still remain reserved even considering internal access to customer inputs. Less than half of the respondents (42%) think that these inputs should be made internally available.

These outcomes represent the respondents' personal opinions regarding information accessibility issues. More specifically, they express cultural values and beliefs that very probably interfere with information sharing and accessibility aspects. Such findings added important insights to our analysis, since we can now fairly infer that the existing difficulties for obtaining and sharing customer information are not due to structural problems only, but also due to people's caution about government information openness. Indeed, all managers who were interviewed expressed data protection concerns about customer information sharing by their departments.

## Discussion

Based upon the study's findings we can draw some conclusions regarding customer orientation aspects in the LA we analyzed. Strategically, the departments are focusing on customers mainly by developing capabilities that allow personalized interactions with customers. The identification of customers' personal needs and the possibility of tracking customers' interactions are strong concerns. For achieving these goals, the departments are registering detailed information about customers and also registering information about the interactions with customers. Focusing on personalization aspects only may be misleading a number of managers (Figure 1) to not taking into account the development of customer segmentation strategies. This aspect constitutes a strategic weakness regarding customer relationship development, once adopting customer segmentation strategies a government can respond to a greater number of stakeholders according to common patterns of needs, which increases responsiveness to society. This emphasis on personalization aspects may also be explained by the fact that the LA is currently engaged in deploying a number of one-stop shops for the customers, which is drawing the managers' attention and efforts to the implementation of personalized customer attendance capabilities, which is one the main potentialities of one-stop shops.

The current operational infrastructure and processes are not adequately supporting the strategic orientation towards customers. Despite the departments have been storing detailed information about customers and their interactions, they are not effectively sharing this information with each other, which is harming the development of joined-up services. Therefore, the delivery of seamless services to customers is not yet fully developed. This aspect suggests that the departments may be deploying solutions in a fragmented manner, which is cited as a usual problem that hinders CRM implementation (Reddy, 2001).

The problems of information sharing and access are mainly due to technical aspects and also due to cultural concerns regarding government information openness. One of the challenges faced by the LA is the integration of different channels of customer interactions and also the integration of new technologies with legacy systems. These integrations need to be developed in the front and back-office, within and between departments. Besides, cultural values regarding government information sharing and access are probably hindering integration efforts. We have detected that the LA's managers are slightly prone to information withholding due to an over emphasis on data protection concerns rather than on freedom of information aspects.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the applicability of CRM in the government context, the business perspective of CRM is strongly recommended to the undertaking of a sound and sustainable organizational changing towards customers. The findings of the study confirm that operational structures and processes are not always aligned to strategic orientations. The CRM grid has shown to be a helpful managerial tool, quickly providing a series of insights that support the process of organizational diagnosis concerning strategic and operational alignment and orientation toward customer.

Our findings have shown that integration with legacy systems, integration of customers' contact channels, and adoption of fragmented solutions are potential problems likely to be faced by governments when implementing CRM initiatives. Of course, this generalization should be limited to the context of local authorities in the UK, and thus far to the context of the LA we analyzed. The scenario regarding CRM adoption very probably varies from local to central government and from one country to another, specially considering cultural aspects.

The observation of the latter aspect above yielded relevant outcomes. The analysis of cultural aspects regarding information sharing and access are of crucial importance. These aspects are usually overlooked and the findings have shown that cultural values and beliefs potentially influence the adoption of CRM practices. Indeed, one of the CRM strengths is the creation of mechanisms that allow efficient and effective information flow between organization and customers. However, governments are still struggling to classify the information they hold according to two paradoxical Acts: Freedom of Information and Data Protection. This study has shown that regarding the issue of public access to government information there are differences amongst public managers' opinions concerning data withholding and openness, and this aspect may hinder CRM initiatives. This issue deserves further research and deeper debate.

In the current scenario of the digital economy, which is mainly characterized by a strong presence of the Internet, the issue of data disclosure and withholding is still lacking of consensus. Hurriedly adopted regulations may lead to distrust and loss of confidence amongst citizens. In the government context, cultural values and beliefs concerning data accessibility aspects should not be overlooked or underestimated. Open discussions, debates and analyses of this matter allow meditation, reassessment, and adjustment of viewpoints towards more unbiased positions.

Summarizing, organizations are more likely to succeed and harvest the benefits of CRM adoption if they consider the strategic, operational, and cultural aspects of it, which in a government context reflects to the community in form of better public services, democratic participation, and public policies actually craved by the society.

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