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How the UAE government modernized citizen services

McKinsey Center for Government May 2016

The United Arab Emirates has worked to improve satisfaction with public services by pursuing digitization.

Government performance goals often focus on generating new revenues and cutting costs, using other government agencies as peer benchmarks. The UAE government, however, has taken a different approach over the past several years, setting its sights on delivering services that would rival the best in the private sector and aiming for the customer-centric feel of a five-star hotel and the efficiency of a leading bank. It also pushed for the use of technology in government services. In 2013, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the vice president and prime minister of the United Arab Emirates and the ruler of Dubai, said, “We want to relocate citizen service centers into every citizen device, enabling them to obtain their desired service through their mobile phones anywhere at any time. A successful government reaches out to the citizens rather than waits for them to come to it.”¹

For the United Arab Emirates and many other countries, the challenge of delivering government services is defined in large part by demographics. The UAE’s population includes a fusion of nationalities, with the often-transient nonlocal population accounting for about 88 percent of its total. Given this diversity and mobility, the government must deliver services that are on par with the best offerings from around the world and that are also easy to navigate and understand, even for the newest residents. In addition, the population is quite young—and this requires constant innovation to meet changing needs; for example, to offer web and mobile-based services as well as standard field offices and call centers.

In light of these challenges, changes, and the country’s goals, the UAE government invested in significant improvements to its services to increase citizen satisfaction. Some of these efforts included introducing electronic voting machines, offering a refillable debit card to facilitate the payment of government fees, and creating a government award for the best technology-driven service solutions. To get changes implemented quickly and efficiently, leaders broke down government silos, unifying different entities and requiring groups to work together. This article takes a closer look at their efforts.

Crowdsourcing and rewarding innovation in app design

In May 2013, UAE leaders set an ambitious goal as part of the call to action for customer-centric government: within two years, all government services should be accessible through mobile devices. In May 2015, Sheikh Mohammed announced that 96 percent of citizen services in the

¹ “Govt of future is innovative: Shaikh Mohammed,” *Khaleej Times*, May 23, 2013, khaleejtimes.com.

government's 337 most important departments had successfully gone mobile. Now a new target has been set: by 2018, 80 percent of those who use government services should be accessing them via mobile devices. This goal puts pressure on the government to promote the shift of its services to mobile while ensuring optimum user-friendliness.

To support and encourage ministries and to generate citizen engagement, the government launched the Best m-Government Award in 2013. The annual award is given to four categories of participants: national, Arab, and international government entities, as well as students in UAE universities. Any type of government service-delivery solution provided via a mobile phone is eligible, from smartphone apps to web solutions to automated text messages. The award recognizes innovation in eight categories: health, education, environment, social affairs, safety and security, tourism, economy and commerce, and transportation and infrastructure. The entries are assessed using three criteria: efficiency and effectiveness (40 percent), ease of use (40 percent), and innovation (20 percent). In addition, the solutions must be related to a core government service offered to external customers, be they consumers or businesses. This excludes government-to-government services; while improvements in this area are important to the country, the award aims to generate citizen- and business-focused solutions.

To encourage creative and new ideas from students in particular, the winner of the student category is awarded a monetary prize of 1 million UAE dirhams (roughly \$300,000) and given business support to commercialize the application. Participation in the overall contest increased by 58 percent in the award's second year, which saw 411 entrants, up from 260 in the first year. This competition has prompted government entities across the emirates and abroad to develop apps aimed at improving the ways citizens interact with their governments. Winners in the second cycle included the following:

- The Dubai Police, in the safety-and-security category, developed a solution that allows citizens to pay fines, report crimes and traffic accidents, and check on the status of applications, among other services. Within a year of launching, the Dubai Police reported that its mobile website had registered more than 1.3 million users and that its mobile app was used by more than 300,000 people. When the app was updated in November 2014, more than 3,000 users downloaded it within a week.
- Drive Now Text Later, created by students from Khawarizmi International College, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, aims to reduce the number of car accidents caused by texting while driving. The app locks the phone screen when a motion sensor detects acceleration and unlocks it when speed reduces or the car stops.
- The General Women's Union app, in the social-affairs category, serves as a medium for women-run, home-based businesses to sell their products and handcrafts. According to the General Women's Union, within three months of launching, the online shop had 200 traders registered and more than 2,000 products on offer, all handmade in the emirates.

- Active Citizen, in the social-affairs category, was created by the Moscow city government in the international category. The app encourages citizens to participate in surveys by earning points that can be redeemed to receive public services free of charge.

Advancing e-voting: A path to greater convenience and participation

E-voting was introduced by the UAE's Federal National Council in 2011 to increase civic participation by making it more convenient and appealing to youth. That year, five months before Election Day, the National Election Committee (NEC) set up voting centers across the country in just two weeks. However, votes were cast not through the traditional methods of filling out forms and depositing them in ballot boxes but rather through electronic voting machines.

To decide how many machines and support staff were needed for each location, program leaders relied on historical data and anticipated turnout, first testing their projections through pilot projects. In the end, 13 voting stations were distributed in each of the seven emirates based on population density, compared with 1 station per emirate in 2006. The physical locations had to be spacious enough to contain many voters and to ensure a smooth flow of voting activities, supported by hundreds of personnel that the NEC trained to aid voters at the stations.

The voting campaign also explored nontraditional channels to increase youth participation. The NEC used social media to reach out to and educate eligible voters, including a brief video and article that described the process.

The improvements were measurable and the results significant. In 2006, it took seven minutes to submit a vote; in 2011, it took only four minutes. Rates of eligibility rose, as did participation rates. In 2006, 6,000 people were eligible to vote. This figure increased to 130,000 in 2011 and 224,000 in 2015. In 2011, the United Arab Emirates also reached a 28 percent participation rate (35,000 voters), despite the novelty of the process. By 2015, the participation rate was 35 percent, or 79,000 voters. The election also sparked interest across the region, with delegations from neighboring countries visiting to study the system.

Making citizens' payments to government more convenient

The e-dirham prepaid card, launched in 2011, can be recharged at ATMs and used to pay fees to any federal-government entity, replacing payments that were mailed or submitted to a government office in cash. Rather than trying to develop, manage, and operate the program independently, the government worked with a state-owned company, the National Bank of Abu Dhabi, which already had many of the capabilities e-dirham aimed to deliver.

The United Arab Emirates was the first Arab country to introduce such a payment system countrywide. To encourage e-dirham use, the Ministry of Finance offered users reduced rates and fees. The system also includes 24/7 support.

As of September 2015, the Ministry of Finance reported that the e-dirham had already collected more than 17 billion dirhams in government fees. It's been used for more than 80 million

transactions in total, with 2 million e-dirham transactions online (as opposed to via electronic point-of-sale terminals). Thirty thousand issues have been reported, tracked, and addressed. According to the Ministry of Finance, the concept quickly gained momentum abroad after its launch, with delegations from Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia discussing some of e-dirham's key lessons and innovations for their countries (for example, in Saudi Arabia, for the SADAD Payment System).

The range of services and options available through e-dirham has continued to expand, now including remote online access, even when traveling abroad, as well as payments to local governments and nongovernment entities. The Ministry of Finance is planning to introduce a full e-wallet—no cards required—and e-vouchers as alternatives to plastic cards.

Creating a culture and standard of excellence

Government entities heeded UAE leaders' call to enhance their public processes for citizens through the Star Rating Program, which uses private-sector standards for the quality of service delivery and private-sector approaches to identify problems. Launched in 2014, the program has a detailed, measurable citizen feedback process that focuses improvements on the issues that matter most to them. Entities across the UAE are evaluated once every two years on eight criteria: strategic alignment, citizens, services, channels, citizen experience, service efficiency and innovation, people, and technology. The entities are given both a plaque with their classification and an evaluation report with recommendations to improve the level of their service delivery.

Designing such a system is the easy part; gaining acceptance from government entities was the much greater challenge. To overcome initial resistance, the central government held road shows, workshops, and promotions that local and federal governments attended to get familiar with the new system. A few entities volunteered to conduct pilots, rating themselves on the assessment. Finally, UAE leadership reinforced the importance of the program and the need to rate all services with equal standards and transparency.

To date, all government entities have been rated between three and five stars with a roughly equal distribution, and no entity has received the seven-star rating. The criteria to obtain a seven-star rating are designed to be quite challenging so that any entity that attains them is comparable to the best of the private sector. A seven-star rating means that the entity innovated across all eight elements, maintained consistent citizen and center-staff satisfaction of at least 95 percent during the past three years, and maintained a record-low cost per service. Sheikh Mohammed has encouraged entities to work toward the highest rating, saying that he appreciates the centers with a five-star rating and expects them to strive for a seven-star rating.



The initiatives described here aspire to make government-service quality more transparent and to create incentives and knowledge for service providers to improve. The United Arab Emirates is upgrading its public services at an unprecedented rate to increase citizen satisfaction. As an early indicator of progress, the Global Innovation Index ranked the country 36th in 2014, up from 38th in 2013, ahead of much of Eastern Europe. In addition, while the aspiration was for government services to meet the standards of the best of the private sector, the Prime Minister's Office of the United Arab Emirates states that a growing number of private-sector companies are now reaching out to the government to learn from its practices. For the UAE and other governments, there are significant opportunities ahead for increased public engagement and customer-centric services. □

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The authors wish to thank Alyazia AlMazrouei, Kate Jackson, and Maha Talaat for their contributions to this article.