Public Attitudes to the Sharing of Personal Information in the Course of Online Public Service Provision

Final Report - *Executive Summary*

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Executive Summary

The desire of government and its agencies to develop new online forms of integrated service provision to citizens requires an increased sharing of personal information between individuals and government agencies and across government and, with that, touches upon the citizen's right to privacy. In this study, we used a qualitative research approach to more deeply explore attitudes of New Zealanders towards the collection, management, and sharing of personal information in the course of electronic public service provision.

The research methods used in this project were a review of available international and national research in the field, semi-structured interviews with IR staff about the conditions and future directions of online integrated public service provision, and ten intensive focus group meetings with different members of the general public and across New Zealand, in May – June 2010. In total, 63 individuals participated in the focus groups. The focus group meetings were prepared and conducted in partnership with Colmar Brunton. For further information on the research design including the limitations of this research, the analytical framework developed for this project, and characteristics of the focus group participants and discussions, please see chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the full report. A detailed description of the research findings can be found in chapters 4, 5 and 6 of the full report.

A summary of the main research findings

Our research findings demonstrate that the majority of participants had a benign view of information sharing intentions and practice in the New Zealand public sector. Generally, the participants in this study had a high trust in the New Zealand government and its agencies and thought that they are working in the best interests of citizens. Exceptions could be found among participants with a high **dependency on social services; Māori; Pasifika; and self**-employed participants.

In general, our research population turned out to be privacy pragmatists: individuals who are prepared to provide personal information to organisations in return for enhancements of public service provision or other personal or collective benefits. However, our research participants were not unconcerned about their privacy and clearly pointed at the need for public service agencies to play privacy by the rules by using provided information only for the intended purpose and asking clients for consent.

Transparency about the use of their personal information by government agencies was generally absent amongst our research participants. Participants provided their information to public sector agencies in order to get the service, but they usually did not understand how their information will be processed or used; why they need to fill in multiple forms with the same information; how and to what length their information will be stored or kept; and who will have access to their information, for instance.

Furthermore, participants showed limited knowledge about the sharing - or non-sharing - of information between agencies. An area of concern to a number of research participants was the accuracy of personal information stored and processed by government agencies, and particularly information used for categorising clients and determining eligibility for services. Several research participants noted problems with incompetent frontline staff members making mistakes with the handling and processing of personal information. This lack of transparency and perceived administrative incompetence led participants to feel uncomfortable about information sharing and wanting to have more control over personal information provided to public sector agencies. This particular response was stronger among

those participants who were more distrustful of government agencies, such as participants from the self-employed, Pasifika, Māori, and beneficiary groups.

A tension in participants' perspectives could be observed in discussing the advantages and disadvantages of cross-agency information sharing at a collective level of interest, and at a personal level of interest. From a collective interest point of view, the majority of participants saw clear benefits of cross-agency information sharing, such as increased effectiveness in public service provision to individuals and a fair allocation of taxpayer funded services, and were permissive therefore. Several participants also pointed at advantages of cross-agency information sharing at a personal level, such as simple and convenient public services, fair public service provision for those who play the game in accordance with the rules, and efficient public service provision.

Where participants perceived disadvantages of cross-agency information sharing at a personal level of interest, they tended to be more protective of their personal information and pointed at the requirement of privacy protection. For instance, vulnerable individuals, particularly those highly dependent on social services, tended to regard information that could be used against them, or information that might lead to a misjudgement in public service provision, as private information. Other high users of social services, such as the superannuitants, thought they were being asked too much private information and felt they did not have any choice about providing the requested information as they needed the service. Furthermore, participants generally felt uncomfortable in sharing personal information with agencies with an eligibility monitoring function and powers to force compliance.

There were also concerns that frontline staff members were not asking for the relevant information to provide the right service. Furthermore, participants expressed difficulties in finding and joining up the bits of public service information that are relevant to them. Research participants experienced limitations of standardised form filling, and a lack of relevant and integrated public service information in accessing public services online. For some, the lack of provision for adding relevant information to their individual case in an online form was the reason they preferred to speak to a staff member rather than using the e-channel for public service consumption.

Most of our research participants demonstrated attributes belonging to a Service State perspective in their attitudes towards information sharing, such as better public service provision and increased service effectiveness; only some of them showed attributes of a Surveillance State perspective, such as increased information asymmetries, eroded trust, social sorting and putting people in the wrong box.

 We also observed that, although research participants generally support cross-agency information sharing for the achievement of a Service State perspective, they did not see specific attributes of a Service State perspective, such as reduced duplication, holistic needs-based service provision and improved access to public services, in the public service relationships they have experienced thus far. Instead, research participants referred to attributes which neither belong to a Service State perspective nor a Surveillance State perspective. These attributes appear to constitute an alternative scenario among our research participants, a Fair State perspective in which increased use of Internet service channels lead to more efficient systems and value for money for the taxpayer; more efficient and equitable enforcement; more fairness in public service use; improved decision making by government agencies; improved service administration by agencies; reduction in information asymmetries; and equality under the Law.

Towards a contextual integrity approach of information sharing

Our research findings strongly support the theoretical viewpoint that context determines peoples' attitudes towards information sharing and privacy in public service environments. The following context-related factors appeared to be of particular importance among our research participants.

Firstly, we observed substantial differences between the majority of our research population and specific groups within that population. We noted differences in information sharing attitudes of those participants with high service dependence; participants who are self-employed; Māori participants; and Pasifika participants. For instance, high service dependent participants and those who are self-employed perceived all personal information as private information, and only wanted to share information with government reluctantly and if they have to, as government is 'not working for them'. Furthermore, high service dependent participants saw clear negative power imbalances and information asymmetries between themselves and public sector agencies. These negative feelings of distrust and powerlessness towards public sector agencies were also present among Māori and Pasifika participants with some subtle differences: for instance, whereas Māori particularly were negative about the integrity and Māori language use of individual public service staff members, Pasifika people found dealing with government agencies difficult and felt demeaned by the process.

Secondly, participants generally supported information sharing between agencies with close or related mandates and overlapping responsibilities. Roughly, we observed that participants make a distinction between the following service clusters: a financial service cluster (e.g. IR & ACC), a social service cluster (e.g. WINZ & Housing), a justice service cluster (e.g. Police, Courts, Immigration & Justice) and a health service cluster. Underlying reasons for participants to be supportive of cross-government information sharing within these service clusters are that agencies can help each other and do a better job.

Thirdly, participants did not treat public service channels as separate contexts for information sharing, but perceived the public service context for information sharing at the level of their particular service need. We can conclude from this that there can be a tension between participants' 'horizontal' attitudes towards information sharing for the purpose of meeting their service need and the 'vertical' organisation and focus of public sector agencies in public service provision.

Finally, due to the fact that participants often perceived a lack of transparency around information sharing with and between public sector agencies, they also did not have a clear context in which they share personal information with public sector agencies. This situation increased discomfort amongst participants, including feelings of information asymmetries and a lack of control over personal information. Consequently, participants' attitudes towards information sharing and privacy implications were coloured as a result of unclear contextual boundaries for information sharing practice and lacking knowledge on the integrity of personal information shared with public sector agencies.

Based on these research findings, we suggest that a contextual approach should be taken in the design and development of information sharing in the course of e-government service provision. If public sector agencies would like to achieve a Service State Perspective in the perception of our research participants, a different approach of contextual integrity of information sharing needs to be developed and managed for the following clusters and sectors:

- Information sharing integrity and transparency within clear contextual boundaries for information sharing practice;
- Information sharing integrity within the context of a specific customer target group, such as beneficiaries, Māori, Pasifika, or self-employed;
- Information sharing integrity within the context of a specific service cluster, such as a financial service cluster, social service cluster, justice service cluster or health service cluster;
- Information sharing integrity within the context of a multi-channel-strategy; and
- Information sharing integrity within the context of a customer's service need.