

Citizens want greater digital accessibility

MARK PAVILONS

The pandemic has taught us many things. We've grown up, out of necessity, to the point where we're now much more digital savvy. And our appetite for more seems insatiable. That's a good thing. The more we become well versed in all things digital, the better off our society will be. At least that's the hope. The demand for digitally accessing government services is higher than ever, and it's here to stay. A survey commissioned by ServiceNow reveals if given the choice, at least two-thirds of Canadians prefer to access services digitally, across federal (69%), provincial (70%) and municipal services (65%). Roughly 74% say the pandemic has made them more open to accessing government services digitally. Delivering great experiences matter, as more than half of Canadians say positive experiences with public services improve their overall perceptions of government (61%) and increase the likelihood they will have future interactions with government agencies (56%). However, access to public services is a challenge for nearly half (46%) of Canadians who rely on someone else to help them navigate government systems. Among those who rely on someone else to handle public service processes for them, 3 in 10 (28%) need help because the process is too complicated, while another 2 in 10 (18%) say they do not know how to do it or where to go. The pandemic has definitely put a major crimp in our document renewal plans. In the past, we were always given plenty of warning when our driver's licences, health cards and the like were about to expire. We were given options way ahead of time. Alas, this year my renewal dates came and went, without notice. I was driving with an expired licence for quite some time before I realized it. I quickly renewed online when I discovered it. A few weeks later, after a visit to a specialist, they told my health card was expired. Off to the Service Ontario website to remedy the situation. However, you can only renew your licence and your health card at the same time. I had to dash off to the nearest Service Ontario outlet, fill out the form, and get my photo snapped. No charge. From what I have heard the pandemic has also given many motorists leeway in renewing their stickers. While not advised, thousands are still running with out-of-date stickers on their rear plates. I find this arbitrary tax on drivers completely unnecessary. "Drive on, people," he said, inciting revolt. I do a fair bit of navigating online and there are times when I access government services. Locally, it's quite simple to find out when to put our large items, curbside, or to get an overnight parking pass. Some sites are better than others. While I'm happy to get answers to all my questions through automated websites, I really don't like conversing with bots. It's not only their lack of stunning vocabulary and witty repartee, but I find them increasingly annoying. They almost seem unwilling to escalate your request, if you don't like the options they present. It is still sometimes impossible to speak to an actual customer service human. I am similarly dismayed at our financial institutions. In these technologically advanced times of lightning-fast Internet, and massive computer networks, there's no reason a simple money transfer or response from head office should take 3 to 5 business days. It should take nano-seconds! I also have little use for filing complaints with Canada Post. An item, with tracking number XYZ, has been delivered! No it hasn't. Yes it has, our records say so! But I don't have it! Off to their website, typing and retyping the tracking number, only to be directed to a form for an inquiry. While our appetite is indeed bigger for digital services, these and others can leave a bad taste in our collective mouths. "People want simple, easy experiences just like they have in their consumer lives," said Marc LeCuyer of ServiceNow. Simplicity and accessibility are key to adoption of public services. Here, here! The study further revealed that 62% of Canadians faced challenges with public services before the process even started, as they had trouble making contact with the correct government department to address their needs. This is a result of outdated and complex systems; not being able to get through phone lines (52%), unable to locate correct information (25%), and getting bounced around to different departments (24%). The bouncing around of inquiries takes place all over, and with every level of hierarchy. In my line of work, I have to try to connect with the right level of government and right ministry, to respond to my questions. In recent months, I've been bounced around so often, it's almost comical. It seems the solution lies in better, more consistent software programs. If every department, every ministry, every level of government used the same systems, navigating them would eventually become child's play. Does any politician actually send out hand-signed letters anymore? Well, yes. A few inquiries to Caledon MP Kyle Seebach resulted in actual letters AND emails addressing my concerns. Kudos to him! Hopefully, when the smog of the pandemic clears we won't forget all of our new-found digital skills. Maybe the systems will become better, as time goes on. Let the fingers do the typing and let's hit the digital highway together!

