

Connecting to citizens: Local government officials' perceptions of technology and online initiatives

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Synopsis

This analysis explores how local government officials perceive the ways in which online technologies enable them to connect to citizens and clients. Using data from a 2010 national survey of local government managers sponsored by the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement (IPCE), we examine the perceptions of local government officials with regards to how online initiatives enhance and create barriers to their work with citizens. In particular, we look at how these perceptions vary by city size and type of work (agency).

Background

This questionnaire asked respondents from the mayor's office, police department, community development department, finance department, and parks and recreation departments about the ways in which online initiatives and the Internet help government managers connect with clients and citizens. Specifically, the questionnaire asked the following three items:

1. *On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department.*
2. *Online initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens.*
3. *The Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city.*

[Response categories: Strongly Agree, Agree, No Opinion, Disagree, Strongly Disagree]

In the following section we outline the general responses to these items. We then look at how these responses vary by city size and department type.

Data

The analysis uses data from a web survey on e-government technology and civic engagement conducted by the Science, Technology and Environmental Policy Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago and supported by IPCE. The survey was administered to government managers in 500 local governments with citizen populations ranging from 25,000 to 250,000.

Because larger cities often have greater financial and technical capacity for e-government, all 184 cities with a population over 100,000 were selected while a proportionate random sample of 316 out of 1,002 communities was drawn from cities with populations under 100,000. For each city, lead managers were identified in each of the following five departments: general city management, community development, finance, the police, and parks and recreation. A total of 2,500 city managers were invited to take part in the survey. The survey began on August 2, 2010 and closed on October 11, 2010. A total of 902 responses were received for a final response rate of 37.9%.¹

On-Line Connections with Citizens

Among the 902 individuals who responded to this survey, the majority agreed that the Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city and online initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department and reduce the amount of face-to-face time spent with clients and citizens. Table 1 indicates that more than two-thirds of respondents agreed that on-line initiatives increase citizen contact with the department. More than three-quarters of respondents believe that the Internet makes people feel more connected to the city. These findings point to the important positive perceptions that local government managers have about on-line initiatives and the Internet. That said, it is important to note that more than half of the respondents believe that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time with clients and citizens, which may be a positive sign of increased efficiency and service delivery or a negative sign of decreased citizen engagement.

Table 1: Questionnaire Item	Agree	Disagree	Neither
<i>On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department.</i>	67%	8%	25%
<i>On-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens.</i>	57%	18%	25%
<i>The Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city.</i>	78%	4%	18%

On-Line Connections with Citizens, by City Size

We are interested in knowing whether local government managers' perceptions of e-government initiatives are related to the size of the city in which the manager works. It is possible that e-government and on-line initiatives enable more frequent contact with citizens in larger cities where technology might enable managers to reach more people than in-person. On the other hand, it is possible that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of time that managers have to meet with clients and citizens. The following charts outline responses to the three questionnaire items of interested by city size: (1) population 25,000-49,999; (2) population 50,000-99,999; (3) population 100,000-149,999; (4) population 150,000-199,999; and (5) population 200,000-250,000.

¹ The population size was reduced to 2380 after removing bad addresses and individuals who are not longer working in the position.

Chart 1 indicates that, overall, local government managers agree that on-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department. More than 60% of respondents in all cities agree that on-line initiatives increase contact between citizens and people working in the department. Agreement is highest among managers working in cities with a population of 50,000 to 99,999. Chart 1 provides evidence that managers believe that e-government initiatives are increasing the civic engagement of citizens at the municipal level, and suggests that mid-sized cities may have the most suitable conditions for fostering engagement. E-government initiatives provide local governments with an opportunity to engage new groups of citizens in civic affairs. Therefore, according to local government managers, communities seeking increased citizen input and collaboration are benefiting from online initiatives.

Chart 1: On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department, by city size.

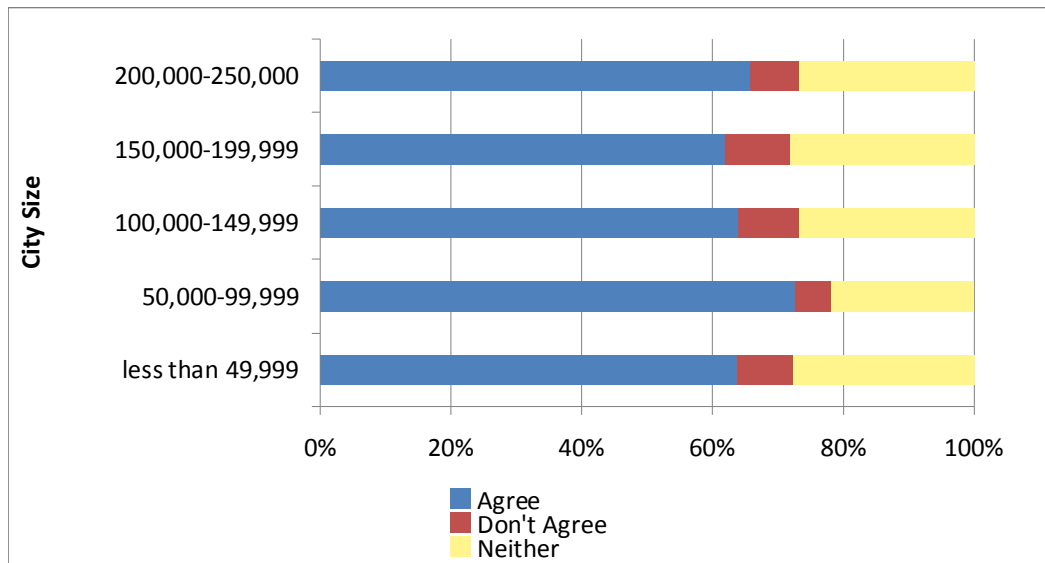


Chart 2 indicates some variation in agreement that “on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens”, by city size. Respondents from smaller cities are less likely to agree that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time they are spending with clients. Managers from the largest cities are the least likely to disagree that face-to-face contact is reduced by on-line initiatives. More than half of all respondents, regardless of city size believe that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time spent with clients and citizens. Thus, a preponderance of municipal managers find a decrease in direct contact with citizens, suggesting that municipal governments are processing citizen requests in a more efficient manner at the expense of more personal communication with their constituencies. This is a worrisome conclusion for those who believe that face-to-face interaction between citizens and government officials fosters more lasting understanding, cooperation, and civic engagement.

Chart 2: On-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens, by city size.

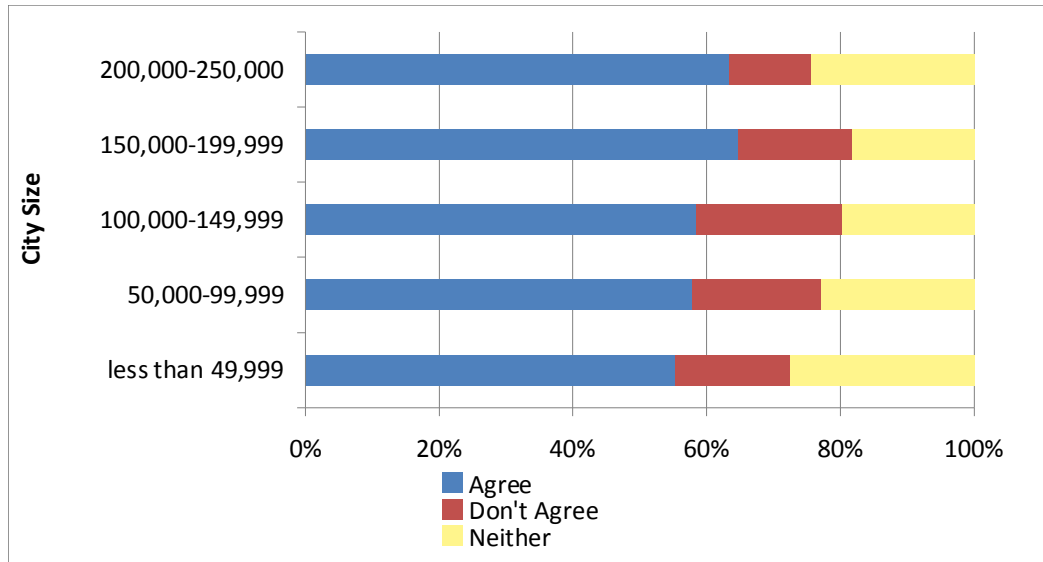
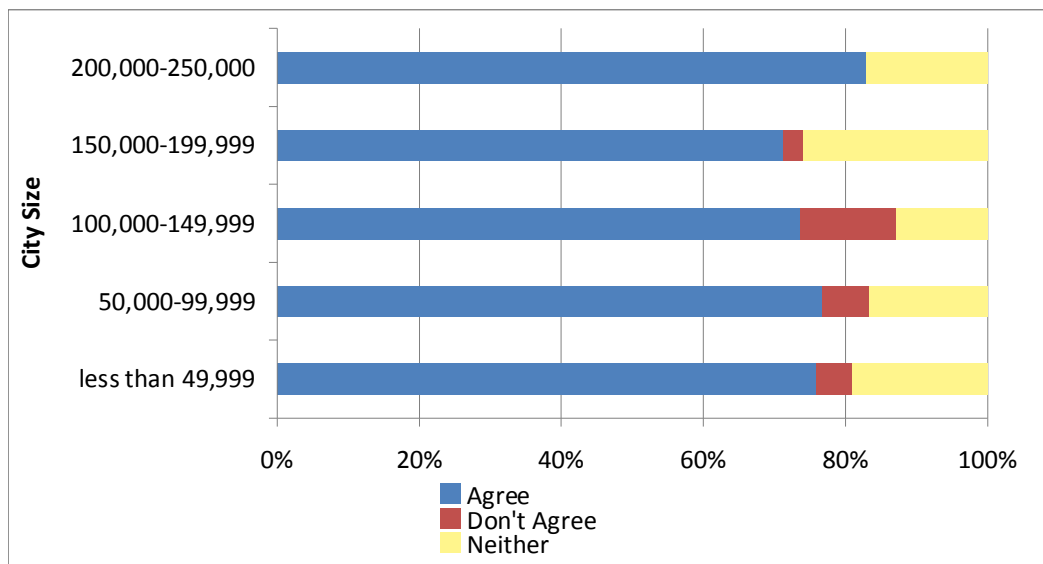


Chart 2 indicates the percentage of responses for agreement, disagreement, and neither agree nor disagree to the item “On-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens” by city size. We see that overall, respondents agree that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time with citizens. The largest amount of disagreement with this statement is among respondents from mid-sized cities (e.g. 100,000-149,999 and 50,000-99,999). Respondents from the largest cities and the smallest cities report the lowest percentage of disagreement with this item.

Chart 3: The Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city, by city size.



More than two-thirds of the respondents agree that the Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city. The largest disagreement for this item comes from managers in mid-sized

cities (100,000-149,999) and smaller cities. More than 80% of respondents from the largest cities (200-250,000) believe that the Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city. And the remaining one fifth neither agree nor disagree that the Internet helps make people feel connected to the city. Municipal managers generally view the Internet as an important tool for incorporating citizens into civic affairs. Larger cities with more extensive bureaucracies and a variety of constituencies may view online initiatives as an important tool for bringing together such diverse groups

While Chart 1 demonstrated that mid-sized cities find the Internet useful in boosting communication between government and citizens, the results illustrated in Chart 3 show that these same cities are the least likely to judge the Internet as a vehicle for uniting the city as a whole. These managers may view the Internet as simply an efficiency tool rather than a source of civic connectedness or pride. Another possible explanation is that many managers from these cities believe their citizens were already very connected to their community before the adoption of online initiatives.

On-Line Connections with Citizens, by City Department

In this second section we investigate the ways in which managers’ perceptions of online initiatives vary by department. In particular, we look at responses from the following five departments: mayor’s office, community development department, finance department, police department, and parks and recreation department.

Chart 4: On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department, by department.

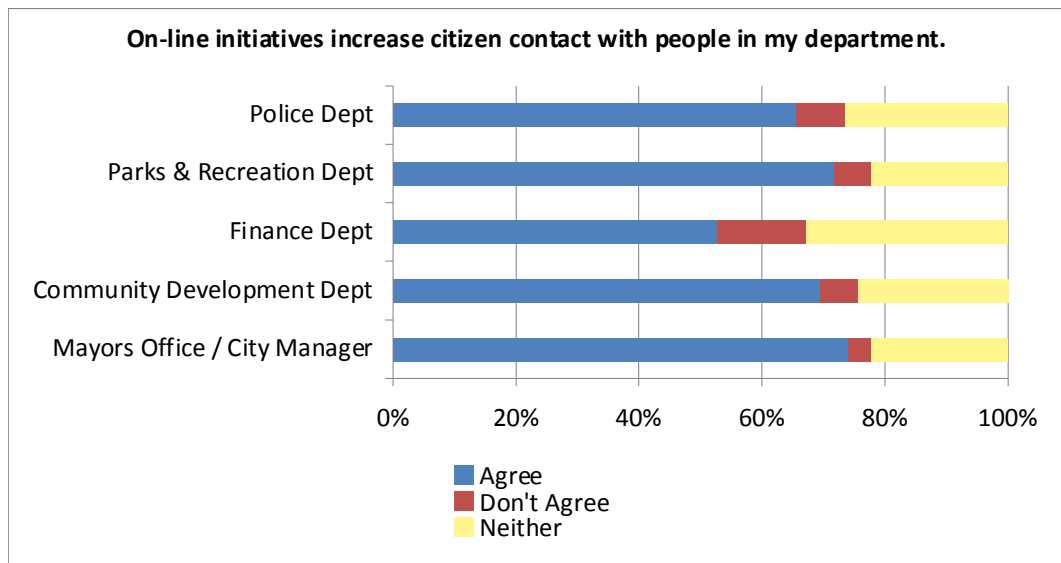
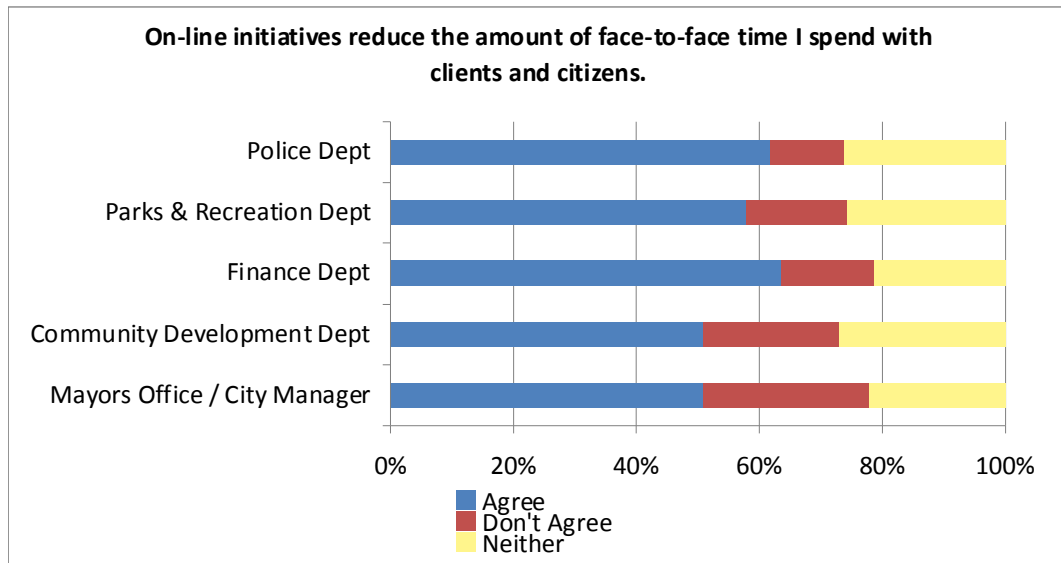


Chart 4 indicates responses to the item “On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department” by city department. We see that managers working in mayor’s offices and parks and recreation departments are most likely to agree that on-line initiatives increase citizen contact with the department. This is likely the result of mayor’s offices providing information

and seeking citizen input on their website and parks and recreation departments offering information about classes and registration services on their websites. Managers working in finance departments are least likely to agree that on-line initiatives increase citizen contact with the people in the department and the most likely to disagree about on-line initiatives connecting citizens to people in the department. This is most likely the result of those working in finance departments, due to the nature of their work, having a lower level of contact with citizens as compared to other departments. Additionally, it is probably that on-line initiatives in finance departments are aiming toward goals other than citizen contact with personnel in the department.

Chart 5: On-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens, by department



Across city departments, there is some variation in agreement that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time spent with clients and citizens. Just over half of the respondents working in the mayor’s office and community development departments agree that on-line initiatives reduce physical contact with clients and citizens. In comparison, nearly two-thirds of respondents from the finance and police departments believe that on-line initiatives reduce face-to-face time spent with clients and citizens. Interestingly, there is much more disagreement on this item among those working in the mayor’s office and community development department as compared to police and finance. Thus, those in police and finance who do not agree are ambivalent (neither agree nor disagree); Respectively, 15% and 12 % of finance and police respondents disagree, whereas 27% and 22% of respondents from the mayor’s office and community development department, respectively, disagree with this statement.

The high level of agreement from police department respondents is likely a result of the transfer of many simple administrative tasks, such as filing reports and complaints, from walk-up counters with personnel to online self-service systems. Similar transitions away from face-to-face services may explain the strong agreement from finance and parks and recreation departments as well; many finance departments now offer online payment systems for municipal bills and registration for parks and recreation classes is often available via the internet. In comparison, Community Development departments often work directly with citizens to plan

projects and often hold open meetings to discussion future plans. Finally, city administration is usually the first point of contact for citizens, so the lower level of agreement here indicates that managers are reporting more face-to-face contact with citizens based on the types of departments in which they work.

If decreases in physical contact are viewed as a negative outcome of e-government initiatives - replacing strong personal communication with indirect digital interchanges - there is a cause for concern here. At least a simple majority from all five departments agree that face-to-face interaction has decreased as a result of on-line initiatives. While this is not terribly worrisome for some departments, like finance, where engagement with citizens was probably already relatively low, other departments such as police and community development depend on forming solid, lasting relationships with city residents. The loss of face-to-face contact in these departments may signal a transformation toward more formal relations between government and citizens at the expense of personal understanding and cooperation. However, the decrease in direct physical contact may also allow for more efficient delivery of services.

Chart 6: The Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city, by department

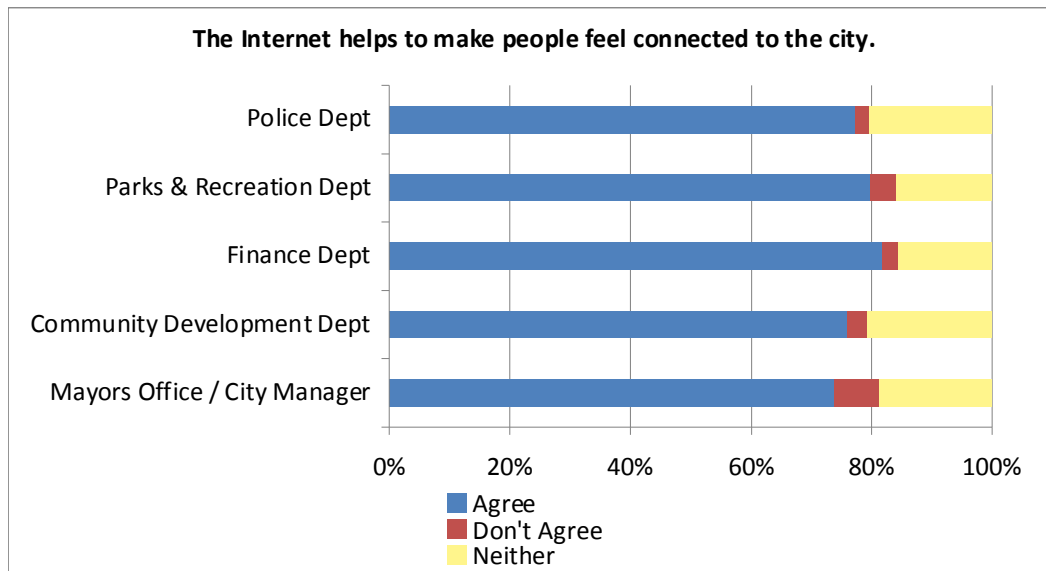


Chart 6 indicates that respondents in the finance department are the most likely to agree that the Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city. This is an interesting finding compared to the lower level of agreement with the item asking about on-line initiatives connecting citizens to the department (see Chart 4). It appears that managers in finance departments see the value of technology (in particular the Internet) in connecting people to the city, but find those on-line initiatives less applicable to connecting citizens to people within the finance department in particular. Respondents from the Mayor’s office are the most likely to disagree that the Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city. Seven percent of respondents from mayor’s office disagreed with this item, compared to only 3% from community development and finance, 4% from parks and recreation, and 2% from police departments. The city administrators or mayors may have the highest level of disagreement because, as the first point of contact for

citizens, they deal with more complaints about online programs or people who cannot use the Internet for services. Another possibility lies in the fact that mayors and city managers are elected and appointed officials, respectively, who might consider city leadership as the driving force behind connecting citizens to their municipal government.

Bivariate Correlations

To understand whether there is an association between the perception of on-line initiatives to connect with citizens and city size, we conducted bivariate correlations. We can see from Table 2 that city size is not statistically significantly related to agreement that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens. However, we do see that respondents from small cities (population 25,000-49,999) are significantly less likely than those from larger cities to agree that “On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department” and “The Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city.” Respondents in cities with a population of 100,000 to 149,999 are significantly more likely to agree that the Internet helps make people feel connected to the city. The correlation analysis indicates that city size might be significantly related to perceptions of contact between citizens and people within departments, but is not related to perceptions of the ways in which on-line initiatives are related to reducing face-to-face time with citizens.

Table 2. Correlations between Agreement on Contact Items and City Size

Population	On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department.	Online initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens.	The Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city.
less than 49,999	-0.067 **	-0.032	-0.045 *
50,000-99,999	0.090 ***	0.012	0.023
100,000-149,999	-0.020	0.009	0.046 *
150,000-199,999	-0.020	0.029	-0.020
200,000-250,000	-0.003	0.018	0.017

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 3 outlines bivariate correlations between the three questionnaire items of interest and the departments where respondents work. We see that there are significant relationships between perceptions of on-line initiatives and department. Respondents in police departments are significantly more likely to agree that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens, which may be a signal of increased efficiency or decreased face-to-face customer service activity. In comparison, respondents from parks and recreation departments are significantly more likely to agree that on-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department. It is possible that this is because parks and recreation departments are using on-line technologies to connect with citizens in new ways, rather than to replace face-to-face service delivery.

Respondents in the mayor’s office are significantly more likely to agree that on-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department and significantly less likely to agree that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens. Thus

respondents from the mayor’s office report a net gain from on-line initiatives, including increased contact and no reduction in face-to-face contact. In comparison, respondents in finance departments report the exact opposite. Finance managers are significantly less likely to agree that on-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department and more likely to agree that on-line initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens. In sum, finance managers see on-line initiatives as reduce face-to-face contact with clients and decreasing citizen contact with people in the department. It might be that for finance departments, on-line initiatives are replacing face-to-face, in person delivery of services and client interaction while mayor’s offices perceive on-line initiative as supplementing interactions with clients.

Table 3. Correlations of Agreement on Contact Items and City Department

City Dept.	On-line initiatives increase citizen contact with people in my department.	Online initiatives reduce the amount of face-to-face time I spend with clients and citizens.	The Internet helps to make people feel connected to the city.
Mayor’s Office	0.065 **	-0.054 *	-0.041
Community Development	0.028	-0.066 **	-0.024
Finance Dept	-0.138 ***	0.062 **	0.046 *
Parks & Recreation Dept	0.055 *	0.010	0.025
Police Dept	-0.016	0.050 *	-0.007

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01;***p<0.001

General Conclusions

In general, local government officials consider technology and on-line initiatives to be positive tools for increasing contact and engagement between residents and cities. Cities that have little to no on-line initiatives and are looking to increase civic engagement might benefit by increasing e-government initiatives.

While the results presented in this brief indicate that local government managers perceive positive outcomes from e-government initiatives, there is some concern that online initiatives are transforming the relationship between citizens and government officials from one of personal, face-to-face contact to one of impersonal, on-line transaction. With services increasingly offered completely online, it is possible that municipal officials learn less about their constituents’ personal lives and needs, though local government managers overwhelmingly believe that on-line initiatives have positive outcomes. It remains important that cities offer on-line programs that complement the delivery of face-to-face government services and do not replace the personal interactions between citizen and government that have lasted for generations.

Questions about this research should be directed to Mary K. Feeney, PhD, Associate Professor, UIC Department of Public Administration - mkfeeney@uic.edu